# A COMMON THREAD

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Many thanks to my husband, Rodney who has always been patient with me, and my two amazing daughters, Kara Rose, and Kailey Ann. They are my home.

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# Chapter 1 - Ella

Today the blows were fiercer than usual. No care was taken to avoid hitting her in places that would not be visible to others. Ella drew back, knowing this was different. Something had shifted in her father's rage. The chiseled tip of his state championship ring made contact with her cheekbone. The hit sent her careening backwards against her closet door. He drew back, shocked at what he had done. Grabbing her by the shoulders, his fingers digging into her skin, he hefted her a few inches off the ground. Dropping his daughter to

the floor, he retreated from the room, making sure to slam the door so that it shook the house. Ella knew better than to think he felt any regret. She knew he was merely incensed at himself for leaving a mark that would require a cover story. She rubbed her throbbing cheek, feeling the welt and moisture. He drew blood? He'd hit her all of her life, but never in the face. She examined herself in the mirror. Blood was seeping from a bright red welt on her left cheekbone, and a bruise was forming under her left eye. Great. What was she going to make up this time? She knew her drama teacher would wonder what had happened. Only in her day dreams were there people who cared enough to actually find out what happened to her. She found herself daydreaming more frequently. In her fantasies, a teacher or fellow student would find out about everything, turn her parents in for neglect, and everyone would see her as a strong, heroic person. She imagined the girls who always made fun of her feeling remorse. She smirked at herself.

Even she knew it was ridiculous. People simply weren't wired that way. She never understood why she felt remorse whenever she did wrong, but no one else ever seemed to. If someone asked her for help, she dropped everything to accommodate them, but no one ever seemed available to help her with even the smallest task. How many times before she was sixteen had she walked all the way home from school, hauling her giant cello case and heavy backpack because the person who promised her a ride after practice bailed? Her mother became so embarrassed by sightings of her ambling along the main road that Mrs. Fuson made her husband give Ella their old beat up Jeep. It was in terrible shape visually, but it meant freedom, and an opportunity to escape to farther places to write, draw, and stay clear of her parents on their social nights. It also meant that she was often asked for rides by her classmates. It made her feel useful so she never turned down a request for a ride.

Today was no exception, as she finished getting ready for school while avoiding her father and his friends. She had no idea why they were all there so early, and she didn't really care. She heard her mother yelling at her father Nathan to hurry up, and go so she could start getting decorations ready for some community garden party luncheon. Stella Ray Fuson was the queen of all things social in their medium-sized Southwestern Ohio town. Their phone rang almost daily with city volunteers who wanted help planning or preparing for some event. Stella knew she was the best, and let everyone know it. To your face, she was sweetness and grace. Once a back was turned, she would tear down each and every person for their obvious short-comings in life. Before marrying Nathan, Stella was starting to gain footing in the regional theatre scene. She claimed, to anyone who would listen, that she had chosen to devote her time to her family and community, and no longer had time to master her craft. She rarely let her husband

forget that she had chosen him when she could have had her pick of any of her handsome leads. Ella had long thought her mother had simply quit before anyone realized how awful she really was. She was far better at acting like a decent human being than at acting out some script. Though it was obvious that Stella had once been a true beauty, age was beginning to wear through her façade. Her once naturally blonde hair was now dyed almost yellow. In sunlight, it reminded Ella of the cheap, fake gold jewelry Stella loved to layer on her fingers, and wrists. Stella's wardrobe was always gorgeous. She spent most of the family's income on a look straight out of a Lands End catalogue. Appearance was everything to Stella Fuson. There was no question in her mind that if you had a physical flaw of any sort, your life was wretched.

Having grabbed a few slices of bread from the kitchen, and a bottle of water, Ella piled her belongings into her jeep, and sped towards her morning pick-ups.

Each week, her fellow orchestra geeks would chip in five bucks for gas and time, and Ella would drive them wherever they needed to go. Today it was just school.

“Hey, lezzy.” Henry Walker slipped into the front passenger seat while sneering at her. Ella hated this particular pet name as she knew it was his brilliant way of calling her a lesbian. He apparently found that to be the worst he could do, so she lived with it. She had been called much worse, and didn’t think that if she had preferred girls it would be anything to be ashamed of. So far, she happened to prefer guys, but with Henry in the car it was easy to see why many did not.

“Hey, Henry. Where’s your baritone?”

“I left it at school. I don’t need to practice all the time. This year’s music is easier than the shit they had us play in middle school.” Henry sat back in the seat with his head high as if he had just stated something of great importance. It seemed to Ella that lots of people felt their words were very important.  Next stop was Emma.

Ella had known Emma since they were in kindergarten. They had been to each other's birthday parties, had play dates, and been in classes together all that time. Emma was the closest to a real friend Ella had ever had, but she was not Emma's closest friend by far. It was a painful fact Ella lived with. She was never the first pick of anyone. She was only called as a last resort when no one else was available. She once told Emma that she was her best friend. Emma's reaction was a hurtful life lesson Ella never would forget. Emma almost recoiled in pain at the thought of Ella telling anyone that she was her best friend. She let Ella know that she was not, nor would she ever be her best friend. Anyone else probably would never have spoken to Emma. Ella just shrugged, and said fine.

"Hi, Ella!" Emma's always cheerful tone made most people smile. Henry certainly did. He had wanted her since they were in diapers. At 18, Henry was over six feet tall, tan, dark hair and eyes, and very handsome. Emma

was as light as Henry was dark, and their yin-yang appearance was very appealing. She plopped her flute case, and backpack onto the back seat and slid in behind Henry. She was first chair in orchestra and the senior band. She was also their senior class vice president. Her parents had not allowed her to take driver's Ed with her class in an effort to keep her home more, so she felt letting Ella drive her to school was her good deed for life.

They pulled into the crowded high school parking lot, and found Ella's assigned spot. In all other aspects of life, Ella felt like a complete loser, so being assigned the first spot in the front row of senior parking had been like winning the lottery. Henry and Emma quickly got out, heading into school far ahead of Ella. She no longer took offense. There was simply no use. She knew she was of no social value to anyone. She headed down the hall to her locker, and then on to home room. Ella sat daydreaming, sketching on her notepad, and paying very little attention to her surroundings. The bell rang for first

period, and she entered her favorite class of the day, Drama class. She loved her teacher who never acted like Ella was a freak, and always encouraged her writing skills, and musical talents. Mrs. Williams was a short, heavy-set woman in her late fifties. She wore a flowing, paisley skirt, a plain button-up white shirt, and comfortable cardigan sweater with a colorful pin at the lapel. Her face was a pleasant heart-shape, and her crystal-blue eyes seemed to shine when she would smile at her class. She wore her silver hair in a tight bun with at least one pencil sticking through it at all times. She was what Ella had always thought of as a classic school-marm with an artsy-fartsy twist.

“Hey, guys and dolls?” Mrs. Williams always brought the class to attention this way. “I’ve got someone new for you to meet.” She gestured to a smiling face in the front row.

The girl seemed somehow older than other girls in the class. She was well-dressed in a Ralph Lauren sort of

way, and her satchel was a dark brown leather bag that reminded Ella of the ones she always saw Professors carry on TV shows and movies. Ella envied her style and looks. In truth, Ella was not bad looking. She was actually quite pretty with her high cheekbones, dark brown eyes, and auburn hair. Years of playing the cello had gifted her with gracefully toned arms. She was not thin, but had the appearance of still having residual baby fat. Since junior year, she had switched from her clunky glasses to contact lenses. Adults frequently told her she looked like a grownup. They had for years. If she had been more worldly-wise, Ella might have figured out that this was more for their sake than hers. Ella made an effort to hide any of her good attributes, however. She didn't wear any makeup, and threw her thick hair back in a simple pony tail, or held it back with a hair band.

"This is Jessalee Benton. She'll be finishing her senior year here at Fairway. I'll mention what some of you are whispering about. Yes. She's related to those Bentons.

Be cool. We're all just people here." Mrs. Williams started handing out assignment sheets for the day.

What had Mrs. W meant by that? Ella had never seen this girl before in her life. She listened to the steady murmur of those around her to gleam information. A boy snickered behind her. Rachel, the snobbiest human being Ella had ever met, sat beside her, talking loudly about how her father had once worked with Jessalee's mother on Broadway. So, the new girl's folks were famous? Ella caught Jessalee's eyes immediately. It struck Ella as odd how the new girl looked at her. It was as if she recognized her from somewhere, and she gave Ella a kind nod. Ella nodded back, and concentrated on her papers. Whoever Jessalee thought Ella reminded her of, she knew as soon as others started talking that would be the end of any potential friendship. It had always been that way. New kids came and went. Ella's easy mannerism, and open nature always made for a kind first meeting, but as soon as it was learned that Ella was the

resident whipping girl, budding friendships were nipped, and awkward silences followed. She held no expectations that this would be any different.

As class ended, the new girl stopped Ella as she made her way to the door.

“Hey. Do you know where the music room is? That’s my next class.” Jessalee fumbled with her bag as she thrust a class list towards Ella. Other girls in the room who were vying for first dibs at grabbing her attention rolled their eyes at the two.

“Jessalee?” Rachel grabbed the new girl’s arm, and turned her away from Ella. “Trust me when I say I would not ask advice from this one. No offense, but she’s a complete spaz.” Rachel giggled, expecting her new found colleague to join in.

Jessalee pulled gently free of Rachel’s grasp, and shook off her hand as if to remove some unseen scum.

“I’m good. Thanks.” She turned back to Ella as if Rachel was no longer there. Rachel stood dumbstruck. She was still standing there as Ella and Jessalee walked down the hall towards the band room together.

“What happened to your face?” Jessalee didn’t look over as she spoke. Ella had completely forgotten about the mess her father had made of her face that morning.

“I ran into a door in the dark this morning.” Ella laughed nervously as she led the way.

“I hope the door looks as bad.” Jessalee grinned, but did not seem convinced. “I’m Jetty. Not Jessalee. That sounds like a cowgirl or something. You can call me Jetty.”

“I’m Ella. It’s not short for anything. I used to pretend it was short for Cinderella though.“ Ella caught herself, and looked to see if she had just scared off her new friend with her weird stories. “Cool.” Jetty followed Ella into the music room, and handed her class list to Mr. Sweeny.

Ella watched as Sweeny looked Jetty up and down. She wondered if he figured she was his next *special pupil.*

“Hello. I hear you play French horn. Quite well according to your last private teacher. Have a seat next to Tom. He’ll show you what we’re working on for the winter concert.” Mr. Sweeny motioned for her to sit next to Tom, a short, stocky boy who was as shy as he was ginger. Two sharp, brown eyes shown above a sea of freckles under a mop of red hair. Jetty took her seat, and Ella sat on the other side of the room with the stringed instruments. They played through the winter arrangements, and Ella listened to hear Jetty’s horn. She was great! Smooth, and without any random squawks like Tom usually produced. Once class was complete, it was time for lunch. Ella always dreaded lunch break. On a great day, she would sit in the band room by herself, and read ahead in British Lit class. On a really crappy day, she’d get stuck in the main lunchroom listening to jeers from her adoring fans. Recently, she chose the back hall

of the Gym to avoid the music room, and the gaze of Mr. Sweeny. The rolled-up mats made great seats. Today, Jetty waited once more at the door as they left. Ella felt it was only fair to let her know the truth. There was no reason she should face ridicule for being seen with the town spaz.

“You really ought to hang out with the others,” Ella said with a tremor in her voice. It was still hard admitting who she was to this world.

Jetty stopped, and looked back at Ella.

“Why is that? Are you afraid they’ll make fun of you for sitting with me?” Jetty seemed genuinely put off.

“Huh? No! I was just saying, I’m kind of the school running joke. Not exactly the most popular person.” Ella cringed as the words left her lips. It hurt to actually say it out loud.

“I like jokes, and I do not give a fuck what people think. You go bonkers if you’re always trying to guess what

everybody else thinks." Jetty walked beside Ella, and continued to talk to her, ignoring anyone else around who tried to cut in. "Who do you usually sit with? Mind if I join too? I don't know anyone else here yet."

"I usually take my food back to the hall, and study."

"Perfect!" Jetty grabbed a tray, and slid it along the rails of the cafeteria lunch line.

"Don't you want to make more new friends?" Ella grabbed a bowl of fruit, and a slice of gross school pizza.

"Eventually. I'd rather make one real friend first though."

"Well you'll never do that if you don't meet more people." Ella paid for her meal, and followed Jetty back towards the band room. Jetty looked at Ella, and shook her head while laughing. This one was going to be a tough nut to crack, but Jetty had been around fake people all her life. She could tell when someone was real, and Ella also seemed in need of a real friend. Jetty was the daughter of a famous director, and a Broadway

legend. She traveled the world, met dozens of film icons, and never wanted for anything. She had more adult friends through her mom than she ever had of her own age. She hadn't wanted to move to Ohio. All she had ever heard of the state was that it was filled with corn fields. She was actually let down to find that it was just another urban sprawl-filled region, like most of the country. Jetty promised her mom she would try to be happy there for the few months that remained until graduation. She didn't need to care what other kids thought about her, and the moment she saw Ella sketching in her notebook, and noticed the bright red slash on her otherwise kind face, she knew she had found someone of interest in this crazy place. She guessed Ella didn't read local papers, and had no clue that Jetty's father was filming in a local town, and had moved his family to Ohio for the filming.

Jetty had mostly been privately tutored, but had decided she wanted the real deal for her senior year. She

wanted to graduate with a large group, throw her cap in the air, and be handed a real diploma. She wanted to go to Prom, play in band with other kids, and do the things her father wrote about in his scripts. Traveling around most of her youth, she had no close friends. She was correct in assuming Ella had none as well. In fact, it seemed Ella had no friends at all. This made Jetty dislike her new home town very much. She wondered if all the boys here were Neanderthals. So far, the other girls, with the exception of Ella, were stereotypical bitches. Maybe this is what public school encourages. Who knows? She liked Ella, however. She was very curious about who had smashed her face in. Doors do not wear rings. The imprint was pretty obvious to anyone who cared to notice. Especially to a kid obsessed with true crime shows. Not even the teachers had asked what had happened. Jetty decided she wanted to know everything she could about the girl who seemed to be invisible except when someone needed to make a rude comment.

She glared at the kids who called Ella names. “Lezzy? That’s a put down?” Jetty laughed in Henry’s face as they headed out to the cars.

“Why? You a lesbo too?” Henry stood his ground.

“If you were my only male option, I would happily say yes.” Jetty laughed. Ella and Emma roared with laughter as they piled into Ella’s car.

“Thanks for the ride, Ella. I really hate buses.” Jetty sat in the front passenger seat, pulled on her seatbelt, and smiled at having called shot gun before Henry. Henry didn’t seem too upset as this gave him the chance to fondle Emma in the back seat as they made out. They had been an item for a few years now, and groped each other in front of Ella, to her disgust. Jetty looked back at the scene, and faked a dry heave.

“Do they do this often?”

“Yep.”

“Kind of gross.” Jetty laughed.

After Ella had dropped off Henry, and Emma, she asked Jetty where she lived.

“How about we hang out at your place a while? My folks will not be home till late, and I told them I’d hang out with friends after school.”

Ella’s face fell. She could not bring anyone home with her, especially not a girl. She had no idea what mood her folks would be in, or if they would even be home. After her dad’s mood that morning, she feared upsetting him. Jetty took note of the pause, and offered up a new idea.

“Want to come to my house? You can fill me in on Fairway. Where everything is, and stuff.”

“Sure!” Ella felt like she could breathe again. She let Jetty direct her to her house. She had expected to go to one of the new, modern Home-a-rama neighborhoods, but instead she was driving up Main Street towards the oldest homes in the city. These were the huge mansion homes that seemed completely out of place in what had

until recent years been one of the fastest dying cities in the nation. Jetty's house was an English manor. Ella had dreamed of living in one of these homes since she was a child. She had never been inside one. She pulled into the long drive back to a separate barn-sized garage behind the home. When she got out, and headed after Jetty towards the house, she could hardly contain her excitement.

"I've always wanted to see inside this house!"

"Really?" Jetty looked up at the house as she unlocked the door by pressing her fore finger against the biometric lock on the deadbolt.

"Cool! It's pretty inside. Lots of old woodwork. A place like this in California would cost millions. Dad got this place for about $200,000. I thought he was joking." Ella exhaled slowly as she looked around the giant remodeled kitchen inside the back entrance. As they made their way towards the foyer's large staircase, Ella noted all the gorgeous wooden floors, original 1920s

wood trim, and ornate fireplaces in every room. It was exactly as she had imagined.

“Someday I’m going to live in one of these houses.” She looked around appreciatively and smiled. Jetty was happy that Ella liked it.

“I’d better take my stuff up to my room. Mom and Dad hate clutter. They’re great, but they are pretty strict when it comes to keeping the house cleaned up.” Jetty laughed. Ella didn’t say anything to that. Her parents never cleaned anything. If Ella didn’t load the dish washer, and do laundry as it piled up, her home could easily end up on an episode of Hoarders. They headed up to Jetty’s room to drop off her bag. Her room was very large, and looked like a showroom out of an IKEA catalog. Ella often clipped items out of that catalog to paste into her “want it” pages in her scrap book. Someday soon, hopefully soon after graduation, she would have her own apartment, and fill it full of everything IKEA. Jetty flopped down on her bed, and let

out a long sigh. Ella looked around for someplace to sit, and settled on a large, red beanbag chair. She watched Jetty staring at her ceiling for a moment, and realized she could not remember the last time she had ever been around anyone her own age that she felt totally at ease around. "You like classical guitar?" Jetty hopped up, and went over to her desk to wake her computer up.

"Yeah. Classical, flamenco, you name it. Especially Django Reinhart." Ella swooned over the name.

Jetty looked over in surprise. She was happy to hear Ella had actually heard of one of the most awesome guitarists ever, as far as she was concerned. She opened up a music program, clicked a few options, and Django Reinhart's bluesy guitar filled the entire house.

"First thing my dad had installed was a whole-house music system. We can all get to it from our computers. Now that it's on I can control it from my phone too." She held up her phone to show the same music screen as her

PC displayed. She put the phone down, wondering if she was showing off too much.

“Nice!” Ella loved it. She had helped her cousin hook their home computer security system up earlier that year. She seemed to be the only person in her family who could get anything to work, so she was always being called on for help.

“Let’s go downstairs to the game room. You play pool?” Jetty beckoned her to follow down the stairs.

“Not very well, but I like it.” Ella followed after her. She had actually only seen her dad play when he had dragged her with him to bars as a kid.

“Cool. I suck at it, but I love playing. I’ve already put a rip in the felt. Luckily, Dad thought he did it because he sucks even worse than I do. Mom’s the pool shark of the family. Hahaha!”

They walked down to the finished basement which was larger than Ella’s entire house. There were old

arcade games, a large antique-looking pool table, and the coolest home theatre Ella had ever seen. The screen was almost an entire wall, and had red velvet curtains on either side. There were old movie posters on the walls surrounding plush theatre seats with cup holders. She supposed if your father was in the film business this was the sort of movie room you would have. Jetty handed Ella a pool cue, and they racked the balls on the table. They played several games before the guitar music paused, and a voice came over the speaker.

“Hey, Jets! Your mom and I are ordering Chinese food. You in?” A male voice boomed through the house startling Ella.

“That’s my dad. You want Chinese?” Jetty asked as she walked over to a control panel on the wall by the stairwell.

“Me?” Ella had never been invited to eat with anyone before. Hearing the male voice over the speakers had unsettled her. She was seventeen-years-old, and she had

never before been at another kid's house for anything other than required birthday parties where the other kid was forced by parents to politely invite Ella.

"Yeah. You eat right? Or will you parents be upset?"

Ella knew her parents could not care less. She always had to find her own food, and often had to buy it herself.

"Sounds good. Are you sure?" In answer, Jetty pushed the call button.

"Sounds good, Dad. Can my friend stay for dinner? She's playing pool with me downstairs."

"Sure! More the merrier!" There was no sarcasm in his tone. Ella felt like she'd walked into a weird bizarro world where people were actually decent, and kind, and no one was actually making fun of her behind her back.

"Thanks." Ella leaned against her pool cue. Was this what normal kids did? Hang out, and actually not feel like freaks? She felt pathetic all over again as she knew

this was not for her. This was not the world she lived in. Any minute something would happen. She'd say something stupid, or get excited about something Jetty thought was dumb, then it would be awkward, and over. Jetty, on the other hand, wasn't about to miss out on learning the story behind her new friend. She liked real people who didn't fit in. She liked unique characters over stereotypes. When Jetty decided someone was her friend that was all there was to it, and Ella was the first real person she had met in this place. It amazed her that even though LA was known for its fake people, and false motives, you drop in on any small town in the world, and face the same attitudes. Maybe it was growing up around a screen writer who was always finding the story in life, but Jetty knew Ella had a good story, and she wanted to know it. Sometimes you just meet someone and you can tell they have some part of them that is very important and in common with you. It may be a hobby or it may be a dark secret, but once Jetty felt she had

that connection, she was bound and determined to keep it. She missed her close friends back in LA. She didn't really make friends easily there as she had a low tolerance for bullshit so the few she had were held dear.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" Jetty racked the balls once more, and chalked up her cue stick.

"Me?" Ella once again seemed flabbergasted.

"Sorry. Girlfriend?" That sort of thing had not crossed Jetty's mind, but it didn't matter. Friends were friends. She forgot that this was small town Ohio though. People weren't quite as open-minded here yet.

"No. I don't have a boyfriend. I like guys, but they all think I'm a freak." Ella laughed, and took aim at the striped balls on the table.

"Why? You seem cool. You're pretty. You're nicer than most of the assholes in that school." She lowered her poll stick to try to pick off a solid. "Sorry if I'm prying. I was actually hoping there would be cool people to meet

too, but haven't met many yet." "Most of the guys around here are either jerks, practically married, or too shy to do anything. I'm not sure about the girls. My experience with them is that they mostly gossip, and talk behind each other's backs." Ella sat down on a bar stool and watched Jetty take a poorly lined up shot. Playing crappy pool with her was the most fun she'd had in ages.

"I have trouble finding guys that aren't just interested in me because of my dad." Jetty laughed, but it was painfully true. Even in what felt like the middle of nowhere, guys still loved her father's action films, and knew he was currently shooting a huge one with big name actors. Ella smirked, knowing how that felt, but for an entirely different reason.

"Lots of guys only talk to me because of my dad." She tried to smile. "He was the hometown football and baseball hero. Won state a few times. He held a state track record for high hurdles for decades. He even played football in college until he blew out his knee. He

still lives off those glory days like he was a war hero." Ella choked up a bit, unconsciously rubbing her cheekbone. Jetty heard the change in tone, and while curiosity was killing her, she didn't want to push. Some people opened up like books when you let them talk about themselves. Others clamped up tight. She didn't know Ella well enough yet to know which type she was. She knew one thing though for certain. Someone was beating the shit out of this girl.

Jetty had become addicted to courtroom and police dramas when her dad was doing research for a buddy cop film. She knew all the language, routines, and many techniques. She had also seen lots of real crime scene photos when her dad was not paying attention to his folders. The images of battered kids and women stuck with her, and gave her nightmares. She liked to play tough, worldly Hollywood kid, but she was just a kid when it came to the reality of domestic violence cases.

“So, what’s up with our orchestra teacher?” Jetty laughed, changing the subject. Ella once again froze. She knew what Jetty meant. Had he tried something with her too?

“What do you mean?” Ella played cool.

“Is it just me, or is he a complete pervert?” Jetty placed her cue on the rack, and pulled a stool up next to Ella.

“Well, if he offers you special after school lessons, skip it.” She grimaced, and shrugged. Jetty winced.

“You know this personally?”

“He g-gives some girls his l-lessons every week.” Ella avoided answering the question directly. She was starting to stutter. She always stuttered when she was flustered or scared. Right now, she was both. Jetty hopped off her bar stool, and faced her.

“Hey. I’m not saying a word. I now think he is a complete douchebag who needs to burn in hell, but I won’t say a

word.” Jetty gave Ella an unexpected hug. Ella winced in pain and shock, tensing up like a board.

“Are you ok?” Jetty jumped back like she’d been stung. “Ella? Are you hurt?” She turned her friend’s bar stool towards her to see tears slowly falling down Ella’s bruised cheek. Ella was completely overwhelmed. It was too much. First having someone actually treat her like a human being, but then to spill her guts about Mr. Sweeny, and then a hug? Ella had always been scared of being touched. The only time people touched her was to hurt or use her, and a friendly hug was just too much at the moment. No help was the fact that her father had punched her in the ribs the previous day, so she was still tender. She tried desperately to rub away her tears on her sleeves. She was sure this display would freak Jetty out.

“I’m so sorry.” Jetty stood an arm’s length away from Ella trying to think of the right thing to say or do. “Who hurt you? I promise I won’t get you in trouble.”

Ella wiped her face on her sleeve, and felt completely mortified. The only thing she hated more than being made fun of in public was crying in front of anyone. She took deep breaths to try to calm the sobs that threatened to escape, and allowed herself to speak.

“I really don’t want to talk about this. I’m so sorry. I’ll go home. They told you I’m a freak. I am. I’m the town spaz.” She flinched as her sleeve brushed against the cut under her eye.

“Well, I will be pissed if you ditch me and my Chinese food. And you aren’t a freak. You’re awesome, and you’ve been through shit. Other people do not know what to do with that. I’ve only known you a day, and I already like you more than anyone else in this town. You’re my only friend here, so I’ll be bummed out if you decide to ditch me because I asked stupid questions. I’m nosy. That’s my fault.” Jetty sat back down next to Ella who was starting to regain her composure.

“I’m sorry.”

“You can quit with the sorry too. When you feel like talking, we’ll talk. You can ask me anything too. I may be just as much of a freak myself, you never know.” Jetty laughed. She did have things in common with Ella. Maybe it was something in the eyes that told her so. She wondered if it was that obvious to everyone, or just those who had been through these things.

“Food is here, Peoples!” Boomed a melodic female voice over the intercom.

“That would be Mom. You want to splash some cold water on your face before we go up?” Jetty pointed her towards the sink beside the wet bar.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“So! How was school, Jessalee?” Vanessa (Nessie) Benton was a gorgeous, tall brunette with warm, brown eyes. Ella had heard her sing on a few Broadway CDs, and was trying very hard not to be star-struck. She knew people are just people, but she didn’t want to give a bad impression.

“It was ok. Ella is in orchestra and drama classes with me, and gave me a ride home.” Jetty opened her carton of chicken fried rice, and dumped it onto her plate.

“I’ve always loved the name Ella.” Nessie beamed. Ella felt her heart would burst with joy. She was sitting in a mansion that she had dreamed of someday being inside, with people who were treating her like a real human being. They chatted about normal things over dinner, and Ella listened as Daniel, Jetty’s father, and Nessie discussed the film shooting schedules coming up. It was wonderful to hear them talking shop about it like anyone would discuss their work whether they were a director, or a dentist. Jetty would occasionally make funny faces to try to crack Ella up. After dinner, Ella sighed, and realized she had to go. It could not last forever.

“I’d better get home. I don’t really have a curfew, but I get in trouble if I get there when Dad’s friends are there.” Ella motioned towards her cheek. She knew Jetty was not stupid, and had already realized what had most

likely happened. Jetty frowned. “Want a ride to school tomorrow?” Ella perked up.

“Yeah! Please. I hate buses more than I can say.” Jetty almost hugged her again, but refrained. “You don’t like hugs so much huh?”

“Well, I do, I’m just not used to nice hugs, and my side kind of hurts today.” She admitted.

“Ella, you don’t have to put up with this, you know that, right? Does he do this often?” Jetty gingerly patted Ella’s shoulder in lieu of a hug.

“He’s the hometown hero, Jetty. He’s freaking Superman around here. And there’s a lot more to it. No one would ever believe me against him. It’s not worth it. Four more months, and I’ll graduate, and leave for good.” She gave a smile as proof that she would be fine. Jetty let it go for now. However, if she saw her friend with any more shiners like today’s she just might have to shove kryptonite up this Superman’s ass.

# Chapter 2 - Sweeny

The house was dark when Ella pulled into her driveway. No one had bothered to leave a porch light on for her. While other parents made their kids be home for dinner, or at least before the nightly news, Ella had no such curfews. Emma had been jealous when she found out about it, but Ella didn't see it as some earned privilege, rather, it was more of a reminder that the two adults in her home gave less than a damn about her. When she was little, she could remember her mother showing her off to friends, and neighbors because she was such a perfect child. So sweet, and smart. She was the perfect

accessory for the perfect woman. Once Ella entered Kindergarten, grew gangly, and taller than most kids, and needed thick glasses just to be able to see her hand in front of her face, the gig was up. She was no longer adorable, and started to become an embarrassment. Her mother never bothered with her now other than to bark orders at her.  Ella pulled her backpack from the car, and slung it over one shoulder. Surely this would lead to back problems in later life, she mused. Later life was honestly not a time Ella expected to get to anyway so who cared? She walked quietly around to the sliding glass patio door leading into the basement to avoid making noise near her parent's room, and slid her key into the lock. The lock released, and Ella started to edge the door sideways only to meet resistance.

"Crap." Ella sighed, and glanced down by the light of her phone. Someone had put the security bar in the door to brace against potential break-ins. That was more bad news. If her dad was worried about someone getting in,

it meant there was something worth stealing in the house. She had no choice but to enter through the squeaky front door. Backing off the porch, and cutting through the thick shrubs, Ella pulled herself up on the fence to the side yard, and hopped over. The Advil she had taken earlier at Jetty's was wearing off, and her cheek started to throb once more. She knew by morning, her face would be a dark purple, and much more noticeably injured. She didn't look forward to the disgusted stares she would get in the halls. Oh well. She walked around the house, and up the front walkway to the main door to the ranch-styled house. Sliding her key in the lock, she braced her arm against the door to try as slowly as possible to edge it open to avoid the loud creak of the hinges. The process backfired, as the door seemed to squeak louder in slow motion. She quickly scooted in, and closed the door behind her in the darkened living room. She stopped to listen for the sounds of anyone else in the house. So far so good. She inched down the

hall to her bedroom, closed the door behind her, and collapsed on her bed. She knew normal people did not have to fear for their lives when they came home each day. Her dad was probably solidly asleep after getting drunk, but her mother was a wildcard. Some nights the woman didn't sleep at all, and those were the worst because she would wake Ella up at all hours of the night asking where things were around the house. Ella's mother only cleaned when she could not sleep, and never knew where anything belonged as Ella was usually the only person responsible enough to put things away in their proper place. She undressed down to her underwear, slid into bed, and quickly dozed off.

THWACK!

Ella sat bolt upright in bed. She looked around to find her father rummaging through her dresser drawers, throwing items across the room in a fury.

"Where are they?" He slammed the drawer closed, and spun around to face his frightened and confused

daughter. “Where are they, you little slut? Letters from Mr. Sweeny? He’s going to be arrested this morning, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to be linked to that puke!” He ripped the blanket off of her, and yanked Ella out of bed. She fell to the floor in pain, grabbing her twisted arm. “Get up! Where are the love letters? They said he sent letters to all his girls.” He hissed the sentence through gritted yellow teeth. Ella had never been sent any letters. Why would she? She knew what had happened to her had been different than for the other girls.

“He didn’t write me any letters. I don’t have any!” She scooted away from him, and stood up with her back to her closet door. “But he fucked you right?” He sneered in disgust.

“If they ask you, you tell them he never laid a hand on you. You got that? I’ll beat you short of death if you say one word about him touching you.” He held his hands to her throat, and squeezed. Not hard enough to cut off her breathing, but enough to hurt. “Dead, girl! You’re dead if

I get mentioned in this shit." He dropped his hands, and stormed out of her room, slamming her door behind him. Ella slunk down her closet door to the floor and sobbed. She rubbed her sore neck. Mr. Sweeny had used her. He had her stay after school for lessons, locked her in a sound-proof practice room, and raped her. She had not been given love letters, or charmed into a relationship with an older man. She had been raped, and the man who should have been fighting mad, should have been ready to kill the man who did such a thing to his child instead was ready to kill her if word got out. She knew the other girls had been much prettier, smarter, and treated like classy whores with first chair assignments, and invitations to play for local civic groups in an ensemble. Not Ella. She knew her dad had probably sent Sweeny her way as payment. Her sobs racked her body. She pulled herself together, and walked across the hall to shower off after she heard her father leave the house for work. She stayed in the hot shower until the

water turned cold, and wrapped a large towel around herself. Wishing her father had just killed her and ended her miserable existence, she pulled on a t-shirt, and jeans, her purple Chuck Taylors, and wrapped her favorite scarf around her neck to cover up the deep red marks her father had left behind. Even she might get noticed if she came to school with a black eye and a bruised throat. Ella did not plan to come home that night after school. It was Friday, and there would be a football game. In her home for as long as she could remember, Friday game night meant she was in for a night of terror. Tonight would be bad if she was home. With her dad's recent violence, the news about Mr. Sweeny, and the fact that it was a home game, it would mean a basement full of her father's buddies playing poker, drinking, and wanting their usual extra entertainment. She could sleep in her jeep at the park if she had to. She stuffed a change of clothes into her backpack, a few packs of hoarded M&Ms, and her sketch journal and fountain pen. She

raced through the house, and out to her car. Having her own car was the only decent thing her parents ever did for her. She headed for school before she realized she still had people to pick up. She sped towards Jetty's house first as it was the farthest from the school. She could double back for Emma and Henry, and honestly was looking forward to seeing a friendly face. Taking deep breaths, she calmed herself so she wouldn't look like someone who had been bawling their eyes out half the morning. The Benton house was lit up brightly with the warm glow of a bustling home. Smoke stretched upward from one of the many chimneys. Someone must've had a roaring fire going in one of the many woodburning fireplaces. Ella pulled around back to the door she and Jetty had entered the day before, and waited. Jetty's mother popped her head out of the back door, and waved.

"She'll be right out, sweety! Always running late!" She chuckled, and popped back into the house. Ella leaned

back in her seat, and took another long, labored breath. Her shoulder ached from her father yanking her by the arm out of bed. She tried to hold the arm tightly to her side. It was most likely sprained this time. Her throat was red and itchy from his grasp, and her cheek throbbed. Seeing Jetty's lovely mother, with her warm trilling voice waving to her made the pain a little less noticeable. She dreamed of having a mom like that. She watched the door for a few more minutes until she finally saw Jetty swing the door open in a flash, and skid out towards her car in a rush.

"Hey! Sorry I'm a little late. I'm still not used to having to get up with an alarm." She grinned over at Ella. Ella nodded back and smiled.

"No biggy. I'm in no hurry to gather the groping duo anyhow." She grinned.

"Ew. Oh yeah. Maybe I should sit in the back today to separate them. They might multiply or something." She pulled open her leather satchel, and brought out a large

envelope. She tucked it under Ella's backpack beside her seat.

"Dad said I could invite you to the set this weekend! There's a parking pass, and VIP guest pass in there. If you want to go." Jetty looked hopeful. "You can go right?"

"Yeah! That sounds awesome! Are you sure?" Ella could not believe it. She automatically tried to give Jetty an out in case her folks had just told her to ask Ella to be polite.

"Well, yeah. Who else would I ask around here? Seriously. It'll be fun. I bet we'll get to be extras. I've been an extra in a few of Dad's films. It's fun. No stress, you just stand around and look like you belong there. Sometimes they even dress you up, and do makeup, and you get paid!" Jetty was beaming with excitement. Ella felt like someone had to be messing with her head. At any moment, someone would jump out, and yell that it was all a big joke. She picked up the other kids, and drove towards the high school building. As they

approached the campus, they could see the flashing lights of police cars in front of the main entrance.

"What the heck?" Henry rolled down his window excitedly. "Hurry up and pull in, Lezzy. Maybe someone got shot or something!"

"Yeah, that really makes me want to hurry to the scene." Ella rolled her eyes. Henry was an idiot. Ella's heart felt like it was in her stomach as they got out of the Jeep, and walked towards the building. In front of everyone, the police were leading Mr. Sweeny towards one of the police cars in handcuffs. He was screaming at them to call his lawyer until the car door slammed in front of him. "Holy shit!" Henry looked over at Emma, Jetty, and Ella. "They're taking Mr. Sweeny!"

Jetty looked over at Ella to see how this was registering with her. Not good was her guess, based on the pale white blanching that was happening to her face.

“Ella? You ok?” She grabbed Ella’s arm to steady her. Before she could hold it back, Ella whirled away from the crowd, and threw up behind her car. Jetty rushed over to help, as the other two rushed towards the crowd to try to gleam information from the mob.

“Hey. You want me to drive you home?” Jetty kneeled down next to Ella, and pulled a tissue out of her bag. “You really do not look good.”

“No!” She looked absolutely terrified now. “I can’t go home.” She pulled herself up against her car. Jetty didn’t ask why. She just waited with Ella to see what the plan would be.

“Well, I’m not thinking you want to go in there feeling like this. Is there anywhere else we could hang for the day? I’ll email an excuse for myself to the office from Mom’s account.”

Ella felt guilt creep in.

“You can’t do that! You’ll get detention. I can just nap here in the car until school’s out.” She opened her car door and slid back inside. Without saying another word, Jetty opened the passenger door, and slid back in as well.

“You are not freaking going off by yourself like some martyr, and I’m not letting you sit out here in this stinking parking lot all day. You’ll get caught by the lot guard anyhow. He looks like a real ass. Let’s get breakfast someplace fun, and go do something. It’s Friday, and I now have one fewer class to worry about today anyhow.” She pulled out her phone, and began typing her excuse email. Ella gave in, and drove off the school grounds, and away from Fairway. She drove south towards Cincinnati to a small town she had visited once before for a band competition; Fairfield. It had a large park with an old stone wall that sat atop the highest point in the county. You could see for miles up there. They picked up coffee, and doughnuts at a drive-

through, then made their way up to Harbin Park hill. Ella pulled in behind the wall and parked. They got out with their breakfasts, and sat on the cold stones. The hill sloped quickly down on the other side of the hill. The view was breath-taking. Even in late fall, with most of the leaves gone from the trees, the woods surrounding the park still made for a beautiful sight. Ella swung her legs over and against the stone wall with a thud.

“Can I ask you, or is it too personal?” Jetty spoke, then sipped her coffee.

“Mr. Sweeny got arrested for fooling around with some of his students. He’d write them private notes about how great they were doing, how much he appreciated them, and how gorgeous they are. Then he would offer them private lessons after school. Apparently, he was a real charmer.” Ella took a long gulp of coffee, and finished her lemony doughnut.

“Did he give you private lessons, and write you love letters?” Jetty put her cup down on the wall.

“He never did any of that nice stuff for me.” She loosened her scarf, which was suddenly far too tight and hot, and pulled it loose without thinking. Jetty noted the marks on Ella’s neck, but stayed silent as Ella spoke. “He told me to stay after so he could help me fix a part I was having trouble with. I knew I was in trouble. I knew that piece perfectly. I wasn’t having any trouble with it. He told me to wait in one of the practice rooms. He came in, placed a poster board over the window on the door, locked us in, and raped me. He didn’t say nice things to me, or offer me lessons. This morning, my dad came in my room and said he’d kill me if anyone found out.” Ella felt her body shake as sobs once more started to move her. She turned away from Jetty in shame. “That’s bullshit!” Jetty hopped off the wall, and paced around. “You didn’t do anything wrong! You know that, right?” Jetty looked at Ella. “You know it wasn’t your fault right?”

“I can’t go home.” Ella rubbed her neck as she spoke. “I’m not going to tell anyone, but until I know for sure my name isn’t mentioned anywhere, I can’t go home. It’s game night too. Those are bad. I…don’t want to be home tonight.”

“Stay at my house. It’s literally a freaking mansion. There’re tons of rooms. Mom won’t care, and we could say you are staying over so we can get up early to go to the set tomorrow. Perfect! Yeah! You’ll stay with me.” Jetty looked her square in the eyes. “You are my friend. My only friend in this state. I have already seen you hurt twice, and I really am not good at letting stuff like that slide. I swear, if I didn’t know it would upset you, I’d be calling the cops on your asshole dad. Seriously, Ella. He can’t get away with hurting you all the time.”

Ella shook her head, still frightened.

“It’s not worth it. It’s my word against his, and his friends. No one would believe me. It’s just four more months. I just have to lay low for four more months, and

I can graduate early, and move away." She drank the last of her coffee, and tossed the cup into a can beside the wall.

"Quit saying it's not worth it." Jetty dropped her voice, and looked down. It made her furious. It made no sense that anyone could not believe a girl who was so obviously abused. "Well, you're coming to my place tonight. Mom and Dad will be happy you're there. Mom really liked you. I think she thinks you'll be a good influence on me."

Both Ella and Jetty laughed at that thought.

"We can get pizza, and watch some funny movies in Dad's theater downstairs. He's staying on site tonight so he won't need it. Will you stay over?" Jetty pleaded.

"That sounds good. If you're sure it won't be a problem?"

"No problem at all.  Do you need anything from your house?  PJs, clothes?"  Ella realized she would need

more clothes. She had only grabbed a shirt to change into in her jeep if she had had to sleep there overnight. She looked at her phone for the time. 10:30 Am. Her dad would be at her work, and her mom should be out most of the day.

“We need to go now if I’m going to get stuff before my folks come home.” They got back in the car, and headed back to Fairway. Ella set a long playlist, and they remained silent the entire drive back to town. She pulled into her driveway, and they got out, and quickly made their way to the front door. Ella could tell no one was home. The coast was clear. Jetty looked around the dingy, unkempt home as they wound their way to Ella’s room which, in contrast, was clean, bright, and cheerful. Ella grabbed her large duffle bag, and shoved enough clothes for a week inside. She knew she could not move out, but she wanted the luxury of having enough to live with for a while. The two girls headed back out to the

car, and drove towards Main Street, and the safety of the large Benton home.

# Chapter 3 – The Bus

Jessalee was not a spoiled, over-privileged rich Hollywood kid. Her parents never coddled her, or kept her from the realities of the real world. They didn't buy everything she asked for, and she had chores, though

they weren't exactly tough. She was expected to keep her grades high even when tutors were few and far between. She had to keep up with her music lessons, and was encouraged to journal her experiences every day as a ritual. Nessie Benton was a kind, loving mother, but she was also a bit distant when she was preparing for a roll, spending whole days down in the family's soundproof studio. Her father was very gruff, but kind. He was extremely over-protective, having seen too many crime scenes while writing his scripts. He also bore the weight of his daughter's past heavily on his shoulders. The last time Jetty had been in public school was in Texas during a long shooting schedule on location. Jetty was twelve, and happy to be around lots of kids her own age for once. She rode the bus to and from their large home near Dallas. After a month of nothing but happy, glowing refrains about her school days, Jetty came home bruised, with a tear in her shirt, and tears in her eyes. She wouldn't say a word, but refused to ever go back to

the school. After writing a strongly-worded note to the school principal about bullies picking on new kids, her father took her out of classes, and hooked her up with private tutors. He never really found out what had happened on that bus between the school and their home, and Jetty never elaborated. She had nightmares for weeks, waking up screaming and crying, but she hid her head in her pillow to keep her parents from finding out.

"Hey, Bitchy Bitch!" The boy was jeering. He was tall, tan, with dirty blonde hair. His face was covered in dark freckles, but his expression was pure hate. He was looming over her from the back seat of the bus. He reached a strong, clammy hand over and clamped down hard on her shoulder, forcing her against the seat. Two other large, older boys stood nearby, one blocked the side of the green bus seat, while the other hung over the seat in front of her, putting his smelly, pale face right up to hers, making kissing noises. A small group of boys

cheered on the blonde boy, Rick, and blocked the aisle while snickering, and offering up ways to hold down 'bitchy bitch'. Rick released her shoulder, and she took a breath, hoping he'd just leave her alone till she could get off the bus. No such luck. He nudged past the big kid who guarded the side of the seat, and slid in beside her. He grabbed her arms, forcing them behind her as he forced her back into the seat. The sound of the cheering, nervous laughter, the feeling of grabbing hands, the shouting, her own cries, it all blended together. It all blurred together until she heard someone yell that her stop was coming, and suddenly the seas parted, and the weights left her, and she was free. She pulled her jeans back up, pulled her t-shirt down, and raced off the bus, not even bothering to gather her things. She hid behind her house, under a shady tree until she could breathe again, and wiped her tears away. She buttoned her jeans, straitened her ripped shirt, and snuck into her

house. She went right in to her bathroom, turned the shower on as hot as she could stand it, and cried.

. . .

Jetty stared out the window, wanting to say a million things, but not knowing how. When they arrived at her house, it was just lunch time. Her mother would be home, and Jetty started trying to put her story together. She knew she could tell Nessie the truth, and her mother would welcome them both with open arms, hot chocolate, and a lavish, home-cooked meal. She was not so sure that would fly with Ella though.

“Are you going to get in trouble?” Ella looked over at Jetty as they parked next to the barn-sized garage.

“Nah. Mom’s pretty cool. I keep my grades up, and I can come and go. She’s not big on organized establishments. We could tell her some of it, you know. She’s really good about this stuff. She will not freak out, or go to the police, or make you say a word.” Jetty tried to decipher Ella’s expression, but was not able to.

“She won’t think I’m a bad person, and not want me around? I’m kind of the stereotypical poor pitiful, bad side of tracks kid.”

Jetty nearly choked on her laughter.

“Girl, there is nothing stereotypical about you! She’ll want to hug you though.” Jetty smiled.

“I’m not good with hugs. I can handle it, but what are we telling her? I don’t want to say anything about my dad. Can we just tell her why I don’t want to be around for the whole Mr. Sweeny deal?”

Jetty nodded, and they headed into the house. Mrs. Benton was bustling around the kitchen, getting ready to fix a fancy lunch salad for herself. She was not a large woman by any means. She was a healthy, toned woman who took care of herself, but one of her life’s joys was true, good, fresh food and home cooking, and she excelled at it. When she saw her daughter and Ella enter the room, at first, she beamed, then seeing the

looks on their faces, and noting the time, she rushed over to the somber duo. “sweetie? You ok?”

“I’m fine. Just a rough day. Did you hear what happened at school this morning?” Jetty slung her satchel up onto the large butcher-block kitchen table that sat in the center of the enormous kitchen. “I did. Pretty scary stuff.” She looked over at Ella, who looked like she would cry at any moment, and Nessie’s heart broke wide open. She knew better than to make a fuss though. It would take someone pretty thick not to put the clues together, and she gathered that Ella was not the sort who would want a bunch of attention, and fuss. Her mom instincts were a bit too high-strung though, and she grabbed Ella up in a big, warm bear-hug. Nessie released her at once when she heard Ella wince in pain. Holding the girl out at arm’s length for a quick examination, she looked over at Jetty for an answer. With the saddest eyes she could muster, Jetty simply shrugged. Nessie gave a nod and a humph noise, and turned back to the refrigerator. She

would be drilling her daughter for answers soon, but this was not the time.

"Lunch! I'm fixing you two lunch. Go chill out for a while, grab a water on your way, and I'll call you when it's ready." She busied herself with pulling out food, and utensils without another word. Jetty motioned for Ella to follow her to the basement.

"This is bizarre." Ella shook her head, and plopped down on a large red beanbag couch. "You people are not normal. I mean that in the best possible way. Normal people hate me. I do not get why you're so nice to me." She laughed grimly as she looked around at all the eclectic décor in the large open room.

"Huh." Jetty collapsed on the other side of the beanbag couch. "Normal people suck then."

"Your whole family is so perfect. You guys are always nice, and loving, and actually like each other. It's weird." Ella leaned back, closing her eyes, feeling safe for the

first time in ages. It made her realize how exhausted she was.

“Ha! We fight. We argue. My folks argue a lot, but you’re right. We’re pretty weird.” Jetty laughed looking over at her friend. Ella was fast asleep. Jetty grabbed a folded blanket off of the back of her favorite reading chair, and covered the sleeping girl up. She quietly headed back up to her mom in the kitchen. How could anyone be so awful to such a nice person?  Nessie looked up at Jetty, and past her for Ella.

“She fell asleep downstairs. She’s beat.” Jetty winced at the words for their truth.

“Poor kid. Mr. Sweeny?”

“Yeah. Other stuff too. People suck so bad.” Jetty’s breath caught, and she hugged her mom tight. Nessie hugged her back just as tight. She could not imagine anyone hurting her own child like that. She could only imagine what Ella’s parents must be going through.

“I’d better call her parents and let them know she’s here. They’ll probably want to come right over.” Nessie reached for the phone. “No! You can’t!” Jetty grabbed the phone out of her hand, feeling guilty. Nessie stood tall with her hand on her hip.

“Jess, do her parents not know what happened? They need to know. If the man is getting arrested, then there’s a reason. I would want to know.” She held out her hand for the phone expecting Jetty to hand it over. Jetty held firmly, and shook her head solemnly.

“We can’t call her parents. They already know, and if they think anyone else knows they’ll hurt her.” Jetty spoke in a loud whisper, looking back towards the basement door to make sure Ella was nowhere nearby.

“You saw her face, right? You should see her throat, Mom. Her dad said he’d kill her if anyone found out she had anything to do with Mr. Sweeny.” Jetty hung the phone back up, and Nessie made no move to pick it up a second time. Instead, she handed her only child a mug of

coffee, and pointed to the kitchen table. “Sit!” It was not said out of anger. Nessie walked over to the basement door, shut it, and walked back over to take a seat next to her daughter. “Tell me the entire story, Jessalee Benton. I need everything you know. There are always two sides to every story so I need to know everything before I go off trying to rip a potentially innocent man’s head off.”

Jetty took a sip of coffee, and held her hands around the mug to feel the warmth. She told her mom everything Ella had told her, and added her own observations. She told her mom how everyone treated Ella at the school, who her parents were around town, and what they seemed to think of their kid. She told her the names she had heard Ella called. How alone she was, and how unfair it was. Nessie didn’t disagree with that. Life had not dealt this child a happy hand. She knew she could not just take Ella in, however much she now wanted to. Nessie was a very tactful woman. She had experience

with human beings who treated others like dirt, and she was very good at maneuvering around these sorts. She took a long draw from her own cup of coffee, and thought about how she should best handle this. Telling her husband was not the way to go just yet. While he would feel the same way towards Ella, he had no filters, and would arrive at the Fuson household with a swat team if he thought a child was being mistreated. She looked over at Jetty, and smiled warmly.

"She's staying here. From the sound of things, they'll barely notice she's gone, and will not care as long as they don't look bad. Why don't you let her sleep a while? Go fix up the spare room next to yours upstairs. Lunch should be ready in about fifteen minutes. You can wake her then, ok?" She tussled Jetty's hair before walking back to finish preparing their meal of chicken salad, freshly-baked bread, and spinach salad. Jetty hopped up, and hurried upstairs smiling. Nessie frowned. She had only just met Ella. She didn't really know anything about

her. However, she trusted her daughter's judgement when it came to friends. Jetty believed Ella, and knew more than she was telling at the moment. Sooner or later Nessie would have to meet the Fusons, and she was not sure she'd be able to remain tactful for long. This would be new. It was like having a feral cat in the home. Ella was very skittish, and while Nessie could completely appreciate the reason behind this, she knew it would take some time to get used to, and even more time to draw out the girl behind the scared expression. It appeared that this child had never been treated well a day in her life. Nessie swore she would spend the rest of the afternoon venting her feelings into the latest project she was preparing for, a musical her best friend was working on. How did normal people deal with this shit? What's normal? She felt guilt over her conversation that morning. She had been furious over their move to small-town hell. She missed her friends in theatre. She missed her favorite coffee stand, and the park she walked every

single morning for years. She missed her normal. She had been completely biased against this Midwestern world she had grown up in. She had been born and raised in the Toledo, Ohio area, and there had always been a sort of disconnect between Northern and Southern Ohio. She had always viewed Southern Ohio as backwards and small-minded. What good could come from living in this place? Now, after meeting Ella, seeing her daughter make a real friend, she had to rethink it all. A believer in fate, she now saw through her daughter that moving here was important. What would have happened to this kid if her child had not met her? Nessie shook her head. People really do suck.

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Ella rubbed her eyes as a bolt of white hot fear shot through her entire body. It took a second for her to realize where she was. She felt awkward, finding herself alone in someone else's home. She straightened herself out, and headed upstairs. Nessie turned and smiled at

her as she opened the basement door which led up into the kitchen.

“Jess is upstairs. Could you let her know lunch is just about ready?” Nessie asked.

“Sure.” Ella smiled, and walked down the hall to the stairway which led to the upstairs bedrooms. Ella walked down the hallway towards Jetty’s room.

“Jetty?” Ella looked in each room.

“In here!” Jetty called from a room next door to hers. Ella walked in to the large open bedroom. It had a huge four-poster bed, antique wooden wardrobes, large marble-topped dresser, and huge windows with heavy silk drapes pulled back by brass fasteners. The floor was polished hardwood, with a large woven rug flung cattycorner across it.

“Sorry. I fell asleep.” Ella joined Jetty by the window looking out at the street below.

“No problem. You like your room?” Jetty motioned around the room, and grinned.

“*MY* room?” Ella was flabbergasted.

“Yep. Mom said you can stay as long as you want. She likes you. You’re going to get hugged a lot now, just so you know.” Jetty laughed.

Ella sat down on an elaborately carved wooden chair next to the dresser. Its seat was plush, and the fabric felt like silk. She had no idea what to say. It didn’t seem real, and she could not trust it. No one had ever been so kind to her. Anyone who was nice to her always wanted something, but she didn’t have anything the Bentons would want. In fact, she could not understand how they wanted her in their home.

“You ok?” Jetty sat on the edge of the bed. “It’s no big deal. It’s not like we’re kidnapping you. You need a place to stay, and we’ve got so much room it’s crazy.”

Ella looked around the beautiful room, at Jetty, the only friend she'd ever had, and down at her own feet, trying not to cry a second time in front of someone.

"You don't even know me. I'm a mess. I am the absolute least popular person in my school, and probably the state. I'm weird. I talk about stupid things, and I do not fit in. I'm a loser." Ella seemed to be pleading with Jetty to see her the way everyone else always had. She needed her to know. She could not bear to let herself feel safe only to have everyone realize they had made an awful mistake.

"Yep. You are a complete weirdo." Jetty deadpanned for a second, but could not keep a straight face. "Real people are not common, or normal, or easy to find anywhere, so no. You are not going to push us away. Plus, Mom is fixing her chicken salad, and it's awesome." Jetty pulled Ella's arms trying to get her up. Ella relented. Tossing her scarf off onto the bed, she followed Jetty out of the room, and down the hall.

As they made their way down the gorgeous wooden stairway that led into the cavernous foyer, the smell of freshly-baked bread met their noses. Ella's stomach growled. They walked into the kitchen, sat down at the table, and watched as Nessie pulled the bread from the double-decker oven. She hurried around placing plates, silverware, and glasses in front of the two girls. Finally, she plopped down the bowl of chicken salad, sliced bread, bowls of leafy salad, and sat between the girls.

"Dig in!" Nessie watched happily as the two girls loaded up plates, and ate till they were full. Just a couple of goofy kids who should only worry about goofy kid stuff. Though she was proud of how her daughter had taken in Ella, she hated that either of the girls had to know about these sorts of life lessons. At seventeen, Jetty had heard the Life talk years ago, and the condom lecture had nearly killed her with embarrassment, but there were things you could not really explain. How do you explain

to a kid that monsters do exist, but they usually look like perfectly normal people walking around without freaking that kid out? Where do you draw that line? Do not talk to strangers, but make a good impression. Smile, but do not give the wrong impression. It's crazy. Her husband was much better at explaining these things. It had been him that gave the condom lecture. That probably accounted for most of the embarrassment. He handled lectures to Jetty as if he were creating a documentary. Jetty was not able to look him in the eyes for weeks without busting out in nervous laughter, which amused Nessie to no end, and mortified her husband. Nessie remembered Jetty's last boyfriend, Kyle, a self-centered model that Nessie had despised. Jetty liked him though, and Nessie knew if she had said she didn't like him, her stubborn daughter might have been more likely to stick with him simply to prove he was not that bad. When the condoms started missing from the bathroom closet in the hall, Nessie's heart had sunk ten levels. It was not till

after Kyle stopped coming by that Jetty had off-handedly mentioned that Kyle ended up preferring other guys, and she had been supplying him with the condoms. Nessie had never been happier to show her support for equal love. She had preached abstinence to Jetty, but realized the reality of things, and preferred a safe daughter to a foolish mother's wishes.

"That was really good, Mrs. Benton. Thanks." Ella wiped her mouth, and got up to put her dishes in the sink.

"You're very welcome, dear." Nessie raised an eyebrow at her own child who took the clue, and put her own dishes in the sink as well. "You can call me Nessie, sweetie. Mrs. Benton is my mother-in-law." She winked, and walked towards the basement stairs. "I'll be in my studio for the afternoon, Jess."

"OK. Mind if we go in the other studio?" Jetty pushed her seat in, and beckoned Ella to come along.

"Sure! Show Ella your dad's gadgets, but do not touch the mixer. He has it set up for a scene he was working on

last night." The three walked down the steps, and split up to opposite sides of the spacious basement. Ella walked after Jetty to a little room off from the theater room. The walls were covered in pocked grey foam for sound-proofing, and it was filled with shelves full of film cases, DVD cases, and electronic devices. Microphone stands stood in the center of the room, and in the corner was a desk covered by a giant mixing board with four large monitors above it for editing. It was awesome, and looked just like the editing rooms Ella had seen on TV.

"Pretty cool, huh?" Jetty looked around.

"Yeah. Really cool!"

"I practice my horn down here. You play guitar also, right?" Jetty remembered Ella's classical guitar that had been left at her house. She had completely forgotten about it.

"Do you play?" Ella walked back out into the theater room.

“A little. Just for fun. Want to see my dad’s guitars? “

Ella raised an eyebrow. Guitars, plural? She followed Jetty into yet another room. The walls were lined with musical instruments. Horns, guitars, drums lined the walls, while larger instruments stood on the floor.

“Wow!” Jetty walked over to a beautiful Rickenbacker six-string hanging on the wall.

“Play it!” Jetty walked over, and took the guitar down, handing it to Ella who stood in awe of the thing.

“Really?” Ella sat down on a stool in the center of the room, as Jetty unwound a long guitar cord, plugged it in, then plugged the other end into a huge stack amp. Ella held the neck to her ear, and plucked each string to check its tune. It was perfectly in tune. She strummed her hand gently over the strings, letting the smooth sound waft over her. She had only ever seen a guitar like this in magazines, and online.

“Need a pick?” Jetty held up a large mug filled with all varieties and thicknesses of guitar picks.

“I don’t use them, thanks.” Ella positioned the guitar comfortably against her, and started gently playing a tune she had played many times before on her dad’s old Fender when he was not home. It never sounded this good though. There was no annoying twangy high pitch. It was smooth as it should be. Jetty was impressed. After the song, Ella gently replaced the guitar on the wall, and stood back as her eyes went very wide.

“Is that a Jose Ramirez A1?” Ella was afraid to even touch it. “Looks like it.” Jetty didn’t have a clue. Her dad was the guitar aficionado. He had been in a fairly popular group back in the 80s, and still played with his friends on occasion.

“Try it out!” Without hesitating, Jetty lifted the classical guitar down off its pegs, and placed in Ella’s awestruck arms.  Ella once again held the neck to her ear, and lightly strummed the strings. It was heavenly. It was

velvety, and smooth, and sounded like a song without even playing a chord. She sat back down, and held the guitar against her, almost scared that she would hurt it. She played her favorite song by Django Reinhart. She could not believe how good it sounded. On her old garage sale guitar, it was alright, but on this guitar, it was pure bliss to her ears. Jetty sat down on the floor near the door and leaned back. Her dad didn't play this well. No one Jetty had ever heard in person played this well. Jetty felt a nudge against her back, and looked up to see her dad totally entranced. Ella stopped abruptly when she saw Mr. Benton, terrified that she was holding his precious guitar.

"Why'd you stop? That was beautiful, kid!" Mr. Benton beamed. "That thing needs to be played more often, and by someone who knows how." He entered the room, and relished the relieved look that washed over the girl's face.

“Ella plays cello too.” Jetty piped in, glad to brag on her friend. She suddenly remembered their plan to visit her dad’s set tomorrow.

“Hey, Dad? Mind if Ella, and I tag along tomorrow to the sets? There’s honestly nothing else to do around here.” She pushed up off of the floor, and helped Ella replace the guitar on the wall.

“Sure! I gave you a pass to give a friend yesterday. Did you remember it?” He headed back to his editing suite as he called over his shoulder.

“Yeah, but I was wondering…” Jetty trailed off mischievously, grinning broadly at her dad.

“Oh, were you?” He laughed. “OK. I can’t promise anything though. There are no fancy getups this time either. It takes place in modern times, everyday U.S.A. That’s why we’re here.” He closed the door behind him. Jetty hopped up and down a few times excitedly, and looked at Ella.

“What?” Ella was lost.

“We get to be extras! We could be in the movie!” Jetty grabbed Ella’s arm, and led her back upstairs. They hurried into Jetty’s room, and sat on the bed laughing.

“Seriously? That’s so cool! What do we do? Just show up, and stand around?”

“Probably. The last time I did it, it was actually really boring, but it’ll be fun with you there. You sit around most of the day till they need you, and might not even get in, but we’ll be able to look around some at least. We get paid too! It’s actually really nice that he let us because extras have to try out usually. We have to really behave on set.” Jetty lay back on her bed, and grinned. Ella was not really impressed by celebrity. She had a great-uncle who was on TV quite often in bit parts. Her mother bragged about it often, but all Ella knew was that the man smelled like cigars and

beer, and only saw them the one time at a family funeral.

“We’d better get to sleep. We have to get up early to get there in time for the casting people to OK our clothes. I’ll bring a bunch of extra stuff in case what we’ve got on isn’t cool.” Jetty led Ella back to the other room.

“I hope I’m able to sleep. I haven’t had this much fun…” Ella cut herself off. She was going to say in years, but honestly, she didn’t think she had ever had this much fun in her whole life. Jetty laughed, and headed back to her bedroom for the night to let Ella settle in, and rest. Ella put her pajamas on, crawled into the enormous bed, and lay back on the luxurious linen pillows. She pulled the soft sheets up over her, then the fluffy duvet-covered feather comforter over that. The old house was drafty so there was a slight chill in the rooms. This didn’t bother Ella one bit. She had never been in a more comfortable bed, nor had she ever felt so safe and welcomed in a home. She wished with all her heart that this was her family. It was a fun fantasy, but no use to linger on. It did remind Ella of one thing though. Her

birthday was only a few months away. She'd be eighteen then; legally an adult. Her father had only been semi-joking on her last birthday when he said he could not wait till she turned eighteen so he could throw her ass out of the house. She pushed the thought out of her head as much as she could, and instead tried to think about the fun of the following day.

# Chapter 4 – The Set

"Wakey, wakey!" Jetty flopped down on the end of Ella's bed. She had already opened the blinds, and the sun was just starting to ebb its way into the morning sky. Ella looked over at Jetty who was holding a metal art box of some sort. "Your own private studio make-up artist!" Jetty held the case in the air.

"We have to cover up that shiner." Ella reluctantly left the warmth of the comfy bed for the chilly morning air. "There's a bathroom across the hall. You get a shower, get dressed, and I'll do some magic. I think if being a screen writer, or street musician falls through, I may become a makeup artist!" She smirked, dropped the

case on the dresser stand, and left to get dressed in her own room while Ella got ready.

Once again, Ella let the shower flow over her head as she cried. She was not even sure why she was crying this time. She felt an emotional overload, and maybe this was the blowing of an emotional circuit. That seemed to explain a teenage breakdown fairly accurately. Ella realized after ten minutes had passed that the water was not anywhere near cooling off, and she shut it off, toweled herself as dry as she could, and headed back into the room to get dressed. She had, several brief times in her life, been away from home with cousins who felt obligated not to leave her out of family gatherings. She remembered staying in hotels with showers, and warm water, and clean towels and sheets. She had always been embarrassed of the fact that her house didn't have a shower, just an ugly old tub. It's not like they were broke. Her parents both made decent salaries, but they were rarely home, so didn't seem to care what

condition the house was in. Ella loved the few times she had been away from home with her relatives. Ella sat in the room, looking out the massive old windows that looked out over the main street into town, and lost in a daze of memory.

“Are you ok?” Jetty startled Ella out of her reverie as she entered. “Yep! Just still a little sleepy.” Ella yawned and stretched for good effect.

“Ready to see if I’m as good as I think?” Jetty patted the makeup box and grinned.

“Go for it. I don’t think you could make it worse unless we’re shooting for a zombie movie.”

“Oh, that would be awesome, but nope. This film is about a family torn apart by the economy, and the fact that the father is away in the military. It’s not the happiest film in the world, but if Dad wrote it, it’ll be great!” She beamed.

She was not even exaggerating. Daniel Benton's films never failed to garner awards regardless of criticism. He never turned out a flop, and that was why he could afford to move his entire family almost on a whim. Nessie was not sure why Daniel had decided to move them to Fairway, when only half the film was shooting nearby. Almost half the film was being shot in Canada, and it was so much more beautiful there. Perhaps it was because Jetty had requested a normal senior year of high school. Graduating on set in Canada would not have qualified for normal. Ella sat down on the stool in front of the dresser, and Jetty dragged the large antique chair over to sit in front of her. She opened up the expandable makeup case that sat on the dresser. Ella looked in awe at all the tools, and colors, and items. It was not like any makeup case she had ever seen. Jetty pulled out a round receptacle of greasy looking make-up. The lid said "Old Age #5."

“This stuff covers up anything. I remembered the older girls swiping this stuff on sets before dances when I was growing up because it will cover up any zits or scars. Actually, a lot of the boys used it too.”

Jetty began applying the thick makeup gingerly to the deep purple bruise that swirled around Ella’s left cheekbone. She winced when she bumped the small cut, but not feeling she did any damage, she moved on.

“There!” Jetty motioned for Ella to look in the mirror. The bruise was completely gone! Not only that, she looked better than she had in ages. Ella was grinning like a fool.

“Thanks!” Ella rocked back on the stool happily.

“Am I dressed ok?” She had chosen her favorite solid black V-neck long-sleeved tee, jeans, a comfy old sweater hoodie, and her Chuck Taylors. Jetty nodded her approval.

“I’ll bring some other options just in case, and you should too. You never know what the casting people want from day to day. Dad’s are pretty picky, but they are really nice. And cute! Seriously. Jared is the guy who helps choose people, and he looks like a mix between classic Cary Grant and George Clooney.” Jetty pretended to swoon.

“Maybe I’ll trip on my way in, and land in his arms.” Ella teased. She was sure the guy would take one look at her and be totally disgusted.

“Mind if I do a little more makeup? Nothing big, just some blush, lip liner, and mascara.” Jetty rifled through the case for the best colors.  Ella was concerned about the eye makeup. She had never worn any because of her contact lenses.

“I’ve never really worn eye makeup. I tried it once, and it really messed with my contacts.”

Jetty looked over thoughtfully.

“Well, we can bring it, and just put it on right before you go in. I can put eye liner on. That shouldn’t be too bad.” Jetty placed her tools of choice on the dresser top.

“Sure!” Ella sat still as Jetty did her thing. Jetty was happy with the results. Ella was gorgeous! She was pretty without any makeup, but with the least addition of accents, she was probably prettier than any other girl in town.

“Ha! I think Jared may try to fall in *YOUR* arms now!” Jetty giggled, and pointed towards the mirror. There was not a vain bone in Ella’s body. She could not afford there to be. Any time in her life she had found even the slightest self-confidence it had been beaten out of her. Looking good was dangerous around her dad’s friends. Still, looking at herself in the mirror sans bruise, looking for all the world like a normal, pretty girl, her heart fluttered towards happy. She hugged Jetty, and thanked her. She realized she was not the least bit afraid of hugging her friend. It was huge for her, but she could not

explain it. For at least this moment, she felt safe and happy, and not like some pathetic loser.

“Do not freaking cry! You’ll ruin that awesome makeup job.” Jetty laughed, and they walked out to the hall. “Oh, man. Omelet!” They could already smell the breakfast Nessie was fixing downstairs.

“Does your mom always cook? Real food?” Ella’s shock amused Jetty.

“Most of the time. Either she cooks, or we get Chinese food. I like her cooking best. She’s constantly finding new recipes online to try.” They walked into the kitchen, and took a seat at the table while watching Nessie finish up. Nessie was in a long, red silk robe over what looked like purple satin pajamas, and wore fuzzy white bunny slippers that had angry faces with bloody fangs. Ella pointed them out to Jetty with a giggle.

“Those are Mom’s vicious rabbit of Bristol slippers from Monty Python’s Spamalot. She played the Lady of the Lake.” Jetty laughed. Ella felt the tiniest bit of star-struck

awe enter the pit of her stomach. She may be the least popular kid at school, but she was still a drama geek, having always worked backstage, and she had listened to Nessie singing the part of the Lady of the Lake for hours, along with many other roles. It suddenly hit Ella that she didn't belong among these people. She suddenly felt very low and out of place. What right did she have to be here, laughing and eating meals with these people? Nessie placed an omelet in front of Jetty, and turned to Ella.

"What would you like in yours, Miss Ella?" Nessie smiled at her guest.

"Anything is ok with me. Hers looks great." Ella shyly replied. Nessie nodded, and turned back to the stove. She dearly wanted to grab the girl up in another huge bear hug, but was very aware that the act would likely terrify the poor kid. "Daniel tells me you are an amazing classical guitarist, Ella." Nessie spoke without turning around.

“It’s just a habit. His guitar was really what made it sound good.” Ella felt herself swell a bit with pride.

“Well, I’ve heard my husband play that guitar many times, and I can tell you that if it sounded great, it was not the instrument.” She turned and winked. Jetty nearly spit out her orange juice. Daniel was a great writer and director. An insanely gifted man, but he was a complete hack when it came to playing a stringed instrument. It was the family unspoken truth. Dad loves to play guitar, but he kind of sucks at it, and that’s totally ok.  Nessie slid the hot plate of eggs, cheese, bacon, and chives in front of Ella. It smelled divine. Ella ate every scrap, and drank down her orange juice. She was not used to having breakfast in the morning. Usually, she would grab a slice of bread, a bottle of water, and head to her room. It was very Oliver Twist when she thought about it, which she tried not to.

“You two look lovely. Have fun today, but be sure to behave. No pestering the gaffers and grips. If you want

to mess with equipment, write your own movie script, kiddo." Nessie leaned down, and kissed the top of Jetty's head. They went back upstairs to brush their teeth, and freshen up their makeup before packing up for the day. Stuffing Jetty's small, rolling suitcase full of clothing options and snacks into the back seat of Ella's Jeep, they programmed the address into their phones. It was a forty-five- minute drive to the filming location. The two girls chatted excitedly the whole way there. As they neared the place, guards with clipboards and radios blocked the road. They walked up to Ella's car, and motioned for her to roll down the window.

"Miss, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. This is a closed set location." Jetty leaned over, and yelled to the guard.

"Hey! Hi there. I'm Jetty Benton. My dad's the director, Daniel Benton. We've got passes to be on the set as extras today." Jetty pulled her passes out, and had Ella hand them out the window to the guard. He reviewed

them, handed them back, smiled, and waved them on through. They giggled the entire drive back towards the set.

"Doesn't that make you feel important?" Ella laughed.

"Yeah, right! I have to work twice as hard to prove I'm not just being allowed to do stuff because my parents are who they are." She grinned, but there was a lot of truth to it. Jetty had frequently been called names, and treated like a rich brat due to the things she was allowed to participate in with her folks.

"Well, in this case, we did kind of get to do this because of that…sort of." Ella grinned sheepishly.

"True. Point taken." They pulled in beside a delivery van, and got out. Jetty spotted a familiar face among the crew. "Mark!" She waved to a balding, red-headed man standing next to a camera rig, telling people what to do. He caught her eye, and waved back. "Who's that?" Ella stayed back, her shyness flooded back over her. The realization of why they were here suddenly became real,

and every self-conscious doubt Ella had ever had seemed to hit her all at once.

“He’s one of Dad’s poker buddies, and a really nice guy. He’s in charge of setting up shots, and making sure the camera angles are perfect.” Jetty pulled her ID lanyard around her neck, handed Ella one as well, and tugged their case along after them. Mark looked like the stereotypical movie crew guy; Baseball hat, flannel shirt over a t-shirt, and well-worn jeans. He grinned at the duo. He knew Jetty well, and was surprised to see she brought along a friend.

“Who’s this?” Mark offered a hand to Ella.

“Mark Mathers, meet Ella Fuson. Extra extraordinaire, and killer guitarist.” Jetty boasted as the two shook hands.

“Nice to meet you, Ella. Jared’s on the other side of the lot. He is swamped with extras today, so do not pout if he doesn’t use you.” He mussed Jetty’s hair before he walked back to his station. Jetty frantically, though good-

humoredly fixed her hair as they rushed across the lot. It was an old town that was famous for its antiques, and small bakeries. Ella had been there before by herself. She had gone to the old bookstore in town, bought a book, and spent the afternoon reading it in the little café down the block. She remembered daydreaming about living here someday, with a shop of her own. Today, it was anything but peaceful. Film crews were everywhere, scaffolding with camera rigs hanging up high swung into the horizon, and gear trucks, and actor's trailers were parked along the back streets. Ella wondered who the stars of the film were, but she knew better than to try to get a look. They were to be strictly professional. The last thing she wanted was to make her friends look bad.

"There he is!" Jetty pointed to a tall, tan statue of a man holding a clipboard, and walking through a line of people Ella guessed were other extras. "Let's hurry! We need to get in that line before he finishes looking everyone over."

They ran to get at the end of the long line of people dressed in normal clothing, arriving just in time for Jared to come up in front of them, and smile.

“Jetster! Nice to see you could make it. Dan told me you were coming with your friend here. Believe it or not, you are the only real teen girls to get here today which is nuts. I’m usually swamped with you goofballs. I have to send a dozen guys home.” He looked Ella up and down in a way that made her a bit uncomfortable, but he seemed happy enough with her. He handed them each a bundle of papers, and walked back to inspect the rest of the line once more.

“Yes!” Jetty hopped up and down a few times, and grabbed Ella’s arm excitedly. “We’re in! OK. You’re going to have to sign your parent’s name a few times since we’re minors” She made a disgusted face at the word minors. They were practically adults. It seemed completely unreasonable that they should have to have parental permission still for anything.

“Now what?” She followed Jetty off towards the large barn that Jared headed towards after leaving the line.

“Now we enjoy craft services, and wait around most of the day till they tell us where to stand, sit or walk around. It’s pretty boring once you’re picked. That’s why I’m glad you’re here too.” Jetty looked over the long table of finger foods, sodas, and bottled water, grabbed a water for each of them, and walked towards a bank of seats by the entrance to the barn. It was a nice location as they could see straight down the road at a lot of the production site.

“Have a seat.” Jetty pulled one of the chairs next to hers, and they sat admiring the view, and chatting. “Jared liked you.” Jetty whispered, looking around to make sure Jared was not in earshot. “Oh, brother.” Ella laughed.

“I’m serious! He totally liked you. He wrote stuff down on his clipboard when he was checking out your clothing, and he didn’t change a thing about how you dressed. Thanks to you, we’re probably going to make it in the

film. I've only done that once!" Jetty took a drink from her water, and leaned back in her seat. They watched the crews, and other extras walk around fixing things for the next scene, or just milling around. It was neat, but reinforced Ella's feelings that there really was not anything that made actors or film makers any different from lawyers and autoworkers. People were just doing their jobs, whatever that might be. Ella held kindness far higher in esteem than celebrity. The Bentons just happened to encompass both.

"Be careful if you have your phone out. If one of the actors or agents thinks you're taking photos they'll freak out. Do you know how to play poker?" Jetty pulled a pack of cards out of her jacket's inner pocket.

"Not really. I'm a bit too loser-ly for that." Ella nervously laughed. Jetty did not.

"Stop. I meant it. You're not a loser." Jetty shuffled the cards in her lap, and dealt Ella five cards. "Let's start with five card draw. I've got an ID card printer at home I make

fun stuff on, nothing illegal. Don't give me that cocked eyebrow look. Geez. I'll print out a cheat sheet card with all the different ways to win and their values for you." Jetty and Ella spent the next hour playing cards, and laughing at how bad they both were at poker faces. Jetty froze as a tall, handsome guy walked up behind Ella and snapped a photo of the two with their cards. There weren't many people that Jetty was shy around, but even she was tongue-tied around this leading man. He winked at Jetty, and leaned over Ella's shoulder to see her cards, unbeknownst to her. Jetty giggled like a little girl, and covered her mouth as Ella looked up at her confused.

"What?" Ella questioned. The guy stood back, and cleared his throat. Ella spun around in her seat expecting Jetty's father or Jared to be standing there. She came face to midsection with Ted Amburgey. She looked up grinning sheepishly. She had seen his face before, but could not quite place it. She didn't get to see many

movies or TV shows other than PBS specials. Ted was about six-foot-two, with wavy black hair, blue eyes, and a strong, square jawline. Most people would swoon like fools, but Ella had met lots of good-looking people who were horrible otherwise. She looked at him skeptically. What was pretty boy doing hanging over her shoulder, and was Jetty's look because she liked him or because he was a complete jerk?

"Hi?" Ella spoke first. Her tone was not unfriendly, but questioning.

Ted knew exactly who Jetty was because of her father. He had yet to meet the girl he was supposed to be flirting with when his leading lady entered the scene, and he was anxious. He knew how people saw him, and while it was sweet being the hunk all the time, he hated how people acted around him. He felt like a freak when people acted like idiots around him. This kid either had no clue who he was, or was not impressed.

“Mind cutting me in?” Ted pulled a chair up between the two girls. He was nineteen-years-old, but could have passed for older. This would be his first adult role, and the one he hoped would end all the talk about him being a used-up child star. Jetty took the cards Ella had, reshuffled the deck, and dealt five cards to each of them.

“Hey, Jetty? When’s your dad getting here?” He didn’t look up from his cards as he spoke.

“Not sure. He was still editing some scenes this morning.” Jetty feigned coolness, as she examined Ted thoroughly. He was gorgeous. She could not understand how Ella could sit right next to him, and not squirm. She could not help wondering if maybe he was not her cup of tea, but scolded herself for the thought. Who cares? Although, if that were the case, she’d have to make sure Ella didn’t think she was leading her on. She watched Ella curiously now as she interacted with Ted, feeling guilty and also a little envious of anyone who could be calm at

this moment. “What are you two up to on set today?” Ted asked Ella directly.

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“Hopefully, we get to be extras, but we haven’t heard yet. They asked us to wait in here, but all the other extras are waiting across the lot so I guess not.” She smiled as she spoke. Ted seemed ok to her. Unfortunately, now that she didn’t feel he was a threat, the rest of him became a bit more of a problem. To Jetty’s amusement, Ella seemed to lose the ability to make eye contact with him suddenly.

“Ah! Well then you are who I’m flirting with today!” Ted lit up with relief. “Thank goodness. You two I can deal with. I was afraid they were going to haul in some fan girl like last time. You’re cool with this right?” He stopped, suddenly noticing the dropped jaws on both girls.

“Uh, sure! Yes. No problem at all.” Jetty stammered out for them both. She was sure her dad would not have put her in this role without telling her first. Jared, however would be laughing his ass off on the other side of the lot. After the initial shock wore off, the realization began to really sink in. An on-screen flirting session with the leading man? Even if they never showed her face, which she’s pretty sure they’d have to, the pay scale was much higher for that than just a walk on role. She looked over at Ella who was also regaining her composure, barely. Would she be jealous if Ella was chosen instead of her? Probably, but she’d get over it. Could Ella even do it? She was awesome, and talented despite herself, but would she be too shy to flirt with a stranger while hundreds of production crew looked on? Could she? Jetty was not sure she was up to it herself.  Ted laughed at the looks on their faces as he guessed correctly that this was the first either of them was hearing about this. He was pretty sure he’d be kissing Ella since Jetty was the

director's kid, and the Bentons were pretty protective. He decided to help them relax since he could tell neither of them were pros.

"How about we go practice?" Noting the hilarious look of oh-no-you-didn't on both of the girls' faces, he added, "Not in a creepy way. No actual contact. Just go through the motions so we aren't freaked out for the shot."

"That'll work!" Jetty hopped up, and tugged Ella by the arm to the side.

"Are you ok with this? I'm totally ok with this, but will you be?" She could not help but giggle as she asked. Ella grinned, a bit nervous about it all. If someone had told her two days ago that she would be on a Movie set about to get paid to flirt with the star of the film, and about to *PRACTICE* flirting with the gorgeous star of the film, she'd have thought they were making fun of her or crazy. With her past, the idea of getting paid to kiss someone was a bit worrisome. She nodded at Jetty, and

walked over to Ted who was standing off behind a trailer where they were relatively out of site.

“OK. The script says as the camera pans over us, I’m like this.” He motioned for Ella to stand up against the trailer, placed his right hand against the trailer above Ella’s left shoulder, and leaned in close.

“I’m supposed to be acting all into you, then lean down, and kiss you as the camera pans up and over us to Cami’s entrance onto the scene. Simple as that.” He stood back and looked her in the eyes to see if she was ok.

“Cool.” She managed, looking from him to Jetty. “Is this ok, Jetty?” She looked over at Jetty, worried that it should be Jetty in this spot, not her.

“Totally.” Seeing them practice the move, she was not so jealous. It was actually going to be awesome seeing Ella get this chance, and still being able to play her friend on and off screen. Ted had also rightly surmised Jared’s casting intentions, as Ella was called on, not five minutes

later to stand in with Ted, while Jetty was told to sit next to her as “loyal friend #1.” The title made her laugh almost uncontrollably for several minutes until she heard Ella’s character’s title; “Easy local girl.” Ella jabbed Jetty’s side, and warned her to clam up on that one. Ella maintained her composure, realizing that if Jetty knew her past, she’d be horrified by Ella’s character name.

“Line up, people!” Mark moved through the scene checking the lighting and camera settings as a girl with a clipboard followed close at his heels. Jetty’s dad came around the corner of the building with his glasses pushed up on top of his head, and a tablet in his hand.

“Ella Fuson?” He smiled broadly. “Take your mark. Ted? You ready this time, kid?” Mr. Benton sat behind the cameramen looking into a monitor that displayed the entire scene.

“Yes, Sir.” Ted eased over to Ella as they got into place just as they had rehearsed. “I’m going to kiss you for real

this time after we flirt. Is that ok? Nothing serious, just lips, I promise."

There was no joking in his tone this time. On set he was all about work, and Ella respected that, however terrified she now felt. She had seen kids in plays give fake stage kisses before. It was no big deal. Except that this time it was her, and it was Ted, and he was unquestionably gorgeous. He even smelled nice. She was now very thankful she had brushed her teeth and gargled before getting there today. The director yelled action, and Ted leaned in casually, and began kissing her gently on the lips. She reacted instinctively, and reached up to steady herself against him. Her brain was a complete blur, but she snapped out of it as Ted broke the kiss, and stood back beaming.

"Great job! See? That wasn't weird at all." He looked down at jetty too, who was giggling at her friend. Ella sat down beside Jetty, as they waited for another take. She looked over at Jetty, nervously. Ted was looking towards

Mr. Benton for instructions, but he stole sideways glances back at the girls. He had enjoyed that take very much, but also knew that he was at least a year older than Ella, and it was always, always a bad idea to think anything of a stage kiss. It was intimate, and naturally made you feel things. He took a deep breath, and shook it off. This was his big Hollywood film with one of the world's best directors, and casts. He was being a stupid kid. Still, he was not going to complain if more takes were needed. Ted was not to be disappointed as it took many more takes before the perfect lighting, and timing occurred. By the end of it, they were both excellent kissers. Ted had no way of knowing that he was Ella's first real kiss. The last time anyone had kissed her had been awful, and forced, and wrong. This experience had been fun, and nice, and gentle, although very, very public. She was very thankful for the closed set and gag order on all cast and crew. As they closed the scene with a wrap, Ted gave both girls a hug.

“That was awesome, girls. I’m not being weird when I say you’re a great kisser, Ella Fuson.” He hugged her extra tight, and walked back towards his trailer. Jetty punched Ella in the arm harder than she meant to.

“Hey!” She laughed at Jetty who was pretending to kiss the air. “Sorry. I will be completely honest. I really want to throat punch you right now, but I still love ya!” She side-hugged Ella, and laughed. “You just spent freaking hours making out with the hottest guy in Hollywood, and I sat next to you the entire time being a wee bit weirded out. It was like watching your cousin stick his tongue down your sister’s throat.” She shuddered.

“First, ew. Second, there was no tongue. It was totally innocent. Third…and this is the one that will get you, that was my first real kiss, and it was just acting.” Ella walked off towards the parking lot while Jetty stopped dead in her tracks.

“Wait! What?” She ran to catch up. “Like, ever?”

“Yes. My first unforced kiss, but I get paid for it. So that’s a little weird.” She could hardly fully register what had happened today. It was really, truly, deeply ridiculous beyond words.

“Ted sure didn’t seem to mind. Damn. Do you even know who he is? I mean, other than Ted, the dude you just played poker with and made out with in front of a crowd?” Jetty shook her head. Her phone buzzed as she got into the car. Jetty read the text message from her father.

“Dad said that if that had been me he had to watch make out all day, he’d have strangled Ted. Ha!” She knew there had to be a reason she was made to sit out. “He also said we both need to get new headshots because when the film comes out next year, we’re going to get calls.”

“I’ve never had any head shots…unless you count this?” Ella looked in the rearview mirror as she wiped off the thick greasy makeup Jetty had skillfully applied to cover

up her beaten face. The bruise was dark purple today. It looked awful. If he had hit her any higher, he might have put her eye out. After today, that seemed like a lifetime ago. Jetty looked at the splotch of blackened skin on her friend's face, and felt her chest tighten. "That looks really bad, Ell." She was about to say more when someone knocked on the driver-side window. Ella rolled it down without a thought.

"Whoa." Ted looked shocked, seeing Ella's face marred by the large bruise.

"Stage make-up. We're shooting a film for school at Jetty's house." Ella was surprised at how easy lying had become to cover up her many family-induced bang-ups.

"Well, whoever did that was a pro! I'm looking at you, Jetster." He leaned over and gave a playful wave to Jetty who was once more finding her tongue was failing to work. "I just came by to say thanks for hanging out, and making out today. You guys made it totally bearable. That was my first onscreen kiss. Granted, Starting

tomorrow, I have to do that and a lot more with Cami." He frowned at the thought which Jetty thought was crazy since Cami Walters was drop-dead gorgeous, and a fantastic actor. "Mine too. First onscreen kiss. It was fun." Ella was trying desperately not to feel any attraction to Ted, but it was not an easy battle to fight. There simply was no use falling for someone who was so astronomically out of her league, and also apparently famous.

"Seriously though, that make-up is spot on." He reached down and tried to rub her cheek, but she pulled back quickly.

"Sorry. She'll kill me if I mess up her artwork." Ella smiled at Jetty who nodded her head in agreement.

"I do not doubt that for one minute." He looked over the top of the jeep towards the set, where he could see his handlers heading towards them. "I better get back. It was nice meeting you, Ella Fuson. See you again some

time." He waved to them both, and walked back to the set.

Ella rolled the window up, turned to Jetty, and gave the universally understood squeeeeeeee of the giddy teenaged girl. "Oh.My.Lord!" Ella reached over and tugged Jetty's sleeve. "That did just happen, correct? I'm not dead or in a coma after getting the shit knocked out of me again?"

Jetty laughed.

"I should totally kick your ass. I bring you on set to be an extra with me, and you get to make out with one of the most famous hunks in Hollywood, who then follows us to your car to say bye…and calls you by your full name. My friend, the universe loves you today."

"Well, after the past seventeen years that I've been through, the universe owes me big time. Although making out with Ted was a nice start. Think he'd go to Prom with me?" Ella joked, expecting Jetty to laugh along.

“He might!”

“Whoa, no. I was completely joking. Completely! And that could not possibly be good for his reputation. Man, it’s a good thing I’m not going to the cops about Sweeny. Can you imagine? If they use me in the film, and then it comes out that I was recently raped by my band teacher?” Ella spoke so nonchalantly about it that it sounded like just a normal thing that happens.

“Um, you are going to the cops. You have to. He needs to go to prison for what he did to you. You’re a minor. The papers aren’t allowed to say who you are.” Jetty was angry. She was not mad at Ella. She was furious that Ella felt like this was just another day in the life for her.

“No. I turn eighteen in a few months. A trial would take longer than that. They have enough others who came forward to get him. They don’t need me. Plus, I think I was the last one he picked on.” Ella started the car, and headed off the lot, and back towards Fairway.

“I read the paper last night on my phone. None of those girls claimed to be raped. They all claimed he charmed them into a romantic relationship. For them it was statutory rape. Creepy, awful, bad stuff, but nowhere near as bad as what he did to you. It’s not fair. He needs to go to jail for a long time. I wish you’d tell Mom what he really did. We’ve got a really nice lawyer on retainer.”

“Jetty, drop it. I don’t want to talk about it anymore. This day has been perfect. Please? Say something else.”

Jetty just wanted to protect her friend. She wished she could tell Ella that she understood. She knew what rape felt like. She also knew she had not told anyone about the bus. Those boys never paid for what they did to her. So how could she ask Ella to tell when she had not? The idea of telling her mom or dad about it made her stomach turn. She threw up a little in her mouth, coughed, and tried not to dry heave.

“You ok?” Ella pulled the car over on the deserted, wooded road. “Jetty? Are you sick?” She ran around to

the passenger side, threw open the door, and stooped down.

“I’m good. My stomach just felt like crud. Probably all those root beers I drank during takes.” She leaned back in her seat, and took deep breaths.

“We better get back to your place.” Ella drove as fast as she could without risking a ticket. Her car was in her father’s name, and he was not someone she wanted to deal with any time soon.

“Do you mind if we don’t? Mind if we get some good coffee, and go park out by the airport, and watch the skydivers? I love doing that.”

“Sure.” Ella drove another ten minutes till she spotted a Starbucks sign off the highway. She took the off ramp, and pulled up to the drive-through, ordered their coffees; a white chocolate mocha iced coffee, and a Carmel macchiato latte double shot. It only took another fifteen minutes to reach the airfield. Ella pulled off in

one of the side-lots behind a ball field that was completely deserted.

“Good?” She looked over at Jetty, who had cracked open her window, and leaned her car seat back a bit.

“Yes. Thanks, Ell.” She paused. As much as drama meant to her life, real life drama was not easy for her to talk about, and she was scared. Once you say something to someone, it’s out there forever. No take backs. Ever.
“Can I tell you something? And do not freak out if I cry, because honestly I might.” Jetty took a drink of her warm, sugary coffee.

“Yeah. Anything. You’ve listened to all my crap.” Ella unbuckled, and turned in her seat.

“I know you don’t want to talk about it, but you really ought to help put Sweeny away. If he gets off easy, you’ll always regret it. Trust me on that. I swear I know how it feels. I don’t think he’ll ever be allowed to teach around kids again, but still. He’ll try something with someone.” Jetty was begging now.

Ella was starting to feel angry. Had she not said repeatedly that she didn't want to talk about it?

"I know you mean well, but I told you to stop it. OK? You have no clue. It's not like he's the first one to do something like that to me. I told you yesterday. You don't even know me. I'm the town loser. It's my word against his, and everyone, including my own dad will just say I'm trying to get attention, and everyone will believe him. They always do." Ella could feel tears brimming her eyelids.

"I'm sorry." Jetty was devastated. Not just by the knowledge that Ella had been through this before, but by the fact that after the past few days, Ella didn't seem to trust their friendship as genuine. She was not a quitter though, and she felt now, more than ever she was not letting Ella go back to her home. "Can I say something?" Jetty pleaded.

Ella nodded.

“I do understand. I wasn’t raised by evil assholes. I grew up with a great support system, so there’s that, but I do know what it feels like to get used.” Jetty took another drink, and cleared her throat.

“I was twelve years old. We lived in Texas at the time, and I was this hyper, goofy new kid at a public school for the first time ever. Everyone heard who my dad was, and some of them didn’t like me because of it. One of the really cute, popular boys called for me to come back to the back of the bus to sit with him and his friends on our way home one day. They made a circle so the front of the bus couldn’t see what was going on. He and his friends held me down, and forced themselves on me. Four of them did it. They ripped my favorite shirt.” Jetty got through the story without crying. She drank the last of her coffee, and looked up at Ella. “Oh, man. I’m so sorry. I never should’ve told anyone.” Jetty sat back. Ella reached over to hug her friend, tears once more brimming.

“We’re a couple of winners.” Ella wiped her face dry, and looked over, and laughed. “You can’t keep that stuff inside forever. It eats you up. I promise I’ll never tell anyone.”

“Same here. Promise. If you say you do not want to tell, I won’t keep saying you should.” Ella got out of the car, and climbed up on the bumper of her jeep, leaning back against the grill, looking out towards the landing strip as the skydiver’s planes took off. Jetty joined her. They sat there watching the jumpers dive from the planes, landing on the airstrip a few yards away from them. “I’m never doing that.” Ella said as she drifted off into a short nap on the warm hood of the car.

“Me either.” Jetty took photos of the jumpers with her phone, letting her friend rest.

# Chapter 5 – Background Check

Nessie exited her studio after a great practice session. She had a pretty good feel for when a show was going to be a hit, and this new show had all the potential of another Wicked. She was sure she would be back on Broadway within a few years after the initial off-Broadway test runs. Pulling the door to the booth closed, she decided it was late enough to lounge. She'd earned

it. She walked back into their laundry room, changed into her PJs that were probably fancier than most people's day clothes, and pulled on her favorite satin robe, and fuzzy slippers. Tonight, they would order in. Remembering they had a guest, Nessie headed upstairs to the girls' rooms. She looked into the guest room at Ella's few belongings, a duffle bag full of clothes, a school backpack, and a cello case. She sighed. She would never regret deciding impulsively to take Ella in, but after a few more days it was going to get tricky. She had done her homework at lunch. She looked into social sites for the area, old newspapers, and even checked out the local criminal records which were open for the public to peruse. Ella's parents were mentioned many, many times supporting local events, volunteering at school functions, chairing committees for fund raiser luncheons…she started to see how anyone could feel small next to these people. Ella's father had quite the record as well. There were numerous reports where

people had called the police to report assaults by the man. All had apparently not been followed up on. Nessie despised injustice, and hated seeing what looked like an awful person getting special hometown treatment. His name was on city signs for his state

championships, and college awards in football, baseball, and track. Apparently, the man's record still held up in state for hurdles. In a small town, that was still a big deal, and apparently, he was worshipped for it. Nessie walked in, and looked through Ella's duffle bag of clothing, making note in her phone of sizes. She knew Ella was not her responsibility, but she was in their lives now. Ella was the most level influence Jetty had in ages, and she liked this girl. It made her furious when she let her mind wander to what the kid had been through recently. She knew it was probably even worse than the few things she knew about. Ella was a beautiful girl. She had amazing talent, and good grades. Most parents would be bragging about her not beating the crap out of

her, and hiding her away. Nessie was not a gossip, and had never been one for catty back stabbing, but she did have one habit that would raise eyebrows if it were widely known. Nessie Benton was an accomplished private detective. She had done research into it for a role once, and enjoyed it so much she took an online course. When it came to finding out everything there was to know, she was a pro. Literally. She pulled up an obituary, and her breath caught. She read it, looked at the date, and counted backwards. Ella would have been eight or nine.

*"Garrett Fuson: Garrett passed away after a tragic gun Cleaning accident this past Wednesday. He was well-known for his athletic skill, and loved by all. He is survived by his parents, Stella and Nathan Fuson, both highly respected In the community, and a younger sister*."

Nessie noted that Ella was not mentioned by name. She felt a pang of guilt over judging the parents so

harshly after they had gone through such a tragedy. She could not imagine how awful a loss that must have been. She continued to search, and found a small article in the larger Cincinnati paper.

*"Local Football Star lost to Apparent Suicide: 16-year-old Garrett Fuson passed away Wednesday from an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. A younger sister was taken from the home by Child Services while an investigation was being completed on how the boy had obtained the unlicensed gun, and due to the physical condition of the girl. The parents have been unavailable for comments. More to come as the story evolves."* Nessie searched till her eyes were sore, but was not able to find any further mention of the case, or the death anywhere. She took off her reading glasses, and rubbed the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. How could an entire community overlook how Ella was treated? Maybe they felt the Fusons had suffered enough? As Nessie walked down to the living

room to watch the evening news, she heard the back door open.

"Hi, Mom! We'll be downstairs watching movies." Jetty and Ella went directly down to the basement theater room.

"Ok!" Nessie called back, but pulled her phone out of her robe pocket to text her daughter. 'Come upstairs a moment by yourself please.' After about ten minutes, Jetty walked into the living room, and sat down across from Nessie on the couch.

"Hey. Is Ella all squared away with a movie?"

"Yeah." Jetty hoped she was not in trouble.

"Good. Do you think she would feel awkward if I got her a few more outfits so she didn't have to go back to her house in the near future? I'm trying to figure out a way to work it out that doesn't seem like charity or like we think her clothes aren't good enough."

Nessie thought for a moment.

“How about you girls go on a shopping trip tomorrow at the outlet mall. I’ll give you each a gift card as congratulations for your on-screen work today. Get a few outfits. Have lunch there.” Nessie sent a text to Daniel informing him that he was stopping to pick up two gift cards and dinner. She loved her husband dearly, but she did boss the poor man around quite often without realizing.

“Awesome!” Jetty’s face lit up. Forced to shop for new clothes? Torture me more! Jetty hopped up, and ran downstairs to tell Ella the fun news.

Ella was thrilled.

“Really? That’s so nice! Are you sure that’s ok?”

“It’s awesome! At that outlet mall we can get twice as many clothes. I’m getting a pair of Converse All Stars. I love yours. I want blue ones though.” In her mind, Jetty’s gift card was already spent.

Ella was planning how she could get the most for her money. She felt like Cinderella. She needed a winter coat, gloves, jeans, and some new tops. It amazed her how a perceptive family who had no contacts with her could see her as more than just the town joke. A glimmer of hope was taking root in her heart. She had not felt that way in years. Not since before her grandmother had died. She had been through so much in her seventeen years. The one time she had confided in another girl, Emma when they were in the third grade, Emma had told her she was making it up to get attention. Nobody could go through all that, and Emma had a crush on Ella's older brother. Ella had not thought about Garrett in a very long time. She made an effort not to. He was Mr. Perfect. Her parents let him get away with anything, including throwing Ella around like a rag doll if she came anywhere near him when his friends were over. Ella had always looked up to him when she was little, and would do whatever he said no matter

what. Knowing what his dad had put Ella through already, He took advantage of that. He and his best friend had come home drunk lots of times after football games, and told Ella to come down to the basement den. The first time, she had been so excited that her brother wanted her around, she ran right down. So naïve. She had no clue what she was in for. After the first time, he made her swear not to tell. He warned her that no one would believe her, and that she'd get in big trouble, or kicked out for being such a slut. Ella didn't even know what the word meant. After that, Garrett's friends started teasing her around the neighborhood. One boy kept asking her if she was a virgin. Ella had only heard that word used at church, and she knew she was not as good as the Virgin Mary, so she said no. The boys' guffaws and jeers hurt her. They started pushing her around, and would grope her, and call her names she'd never heard before. Garrett started getting more violent towards her, and would shove guys away, threatening

them if they said a word to anyone that made him look bad. He started telling them they'd have to deal with his father if they messed with Ella for free. On the last night that Garret ever used her, he had two of his drunken friends with him. One was an older boy who Ella had never met before. Ella begged Garrett to just leave her alone, and let her go upstairs, but he threw her into the laundry side of the basement, and locked her inside. She sat in the dark, listening. The boys were laughing, cracking open more beers from their father's den beer cooler, and making weird noises. She tried to peek through the crack under the door. She could only see their bare feet moving around till she saw Garrett's good friend fall to the floor laughing. The older boy was on top of him. She scooted back to the space beside the dryer, knowing they would come for her sooner or later. She heard them stop laughing, and the older boy was speaking.

“Ok, bro. Bring the girl in here. You said I could do whatever I want, right?”

“Do whatever you want with her. I don’t care.” He laughed, and Ella could hear him coming towards her.

Garrett tugged her up by her arm, and dragged her to the finished side of the basement. His friend, Joe stood in front of the stairs to make sure she didn’t run away, not that she ever had. Where would she run to? The older boy towered over her. He must have been a senior on the team. He was huge. He unfastened his pants, and dragged Ella to the couch. This time was not like the others. Garrett and his friend had messed with her many times, but this was much worse. This boy was rough with her, and pinned her face-down on the couch almost suffocating her. She cried out into the cushions as she felt the weight of him. She could hear Joe’s shocked voice.

“Dude! You’re actually doin’ it! Ha!” He laughed nervously. Garrett’s voice, however, sounded frightened.

“Don’t go too far, man. I’ll get in trouble.”

“You said anything. I gave you fifty bucks. I’m getting my money’s worth unless you want to give me back the money, or maybe tell your dad you’re taking over his shop?” He laughed as he continued his assault.

Garrett stood back, suddenly not quite drunk enough. He looked nervously at Joe who was watching the entire thing, cheering the guy on. Garrett suddenly felt very sick, and ran to the laundry room to puke in the mop sink. He waited in there until it had quieted down in the other room, and walked back in. Ella lay motionless on the couch as the older boy buckled his pants, and grinned. He high-fived Joe, as they heard footsteps upstairs.

“You guys better split!” Garrett motioned them towards the basement exterior door. Joe yelped, and ran for it.

The older boy casually walked out, and shut the door behind him. Garrett turned Ella over. She was sobbing, and there was blood on her. "Shhh! Shut the hell up! Shut up!" He hissed in a whisper. "Go clean up in the laundry room, and don't say a damn thing to Mom and Dad or you're dead!" He pulled a blanket over the bloody spots on the couch, and raced upstairs to meet his folks. Ella remembered making it back up to her room, but she didn't remember much after that. She was sore, and still bleeding. The following day at school, after she complained of extreme cramping, and was bleeding through her pants, she was told to go to the school nurse. She remembered the kind old woman's disgusted expression after looking Ella over briefly. The nurse left her sitting on the small plastic-coated cot, and picked up her phone to call Ella's parents. That afternoon, when her mother had finally arrived to claim her in the nurse's office, she heard her mother arguing loudly with the nurse, making threats to sue the school. Ella was walked

to her mother's car in silence. It wasn't until they were in the car, and moving that her mother's tirade began.

"So you're a slut now?? Thank the lord you're not old enough to get pregnant! Wait till your father hears about this!" Stella was mortified. What if people at the city center found out? That night, she never found out what her dad would have said because when they came home, they found Garrett dead from a gunshot wound to the head. After that was days of chaos. Ella was taken out of the home, examined, and put in a temporary foster home. She heard her father screaming at a man in a suit about her. The man was calmly explaining what he thought Garrett had been doing to Ella for quite a while based on scarring. Mr. Fuson knocked the man to the ground, and was restrained by several police officers, as another man and woman in suits ushered Ella into the back seat of a police cruiser. Somehow, over the next few months, everything just went away. It was not allowed to be talked about. Garrett was just not there

anymore, and they were left with Ella, the cause of all the trouble to begin with.

# Chapter 6 – A Break

Ella opened her eyes, looked at the clock on her nightstand, and shot up out of bed. Eleven-thirty on a Sunday? She'd slept in! She threw on the robe Jetty had loaned her, and walked out in the hall. Peeking into Jetty's room, she saw that she too was still in bed, fast asleep. Ella breathed out slowly, and headed back to her

room. She was afraid she had caused them to miss church. She knew her own parents would be getting home from their church right about now. Ella had been discouraged from joining the family at church years ago. Heaven forbid that she make them look bad in front of God. Ella had read the Bible many times, and never understood how people who claimed to follow such a wonderful man, could claim some of the things she had heard in her family church. She sighed. The Man she believed in didn't hate anyone. Not even her. That fact had come as a great relief when she was younger. It was probably the only reason she had not slit her wrists by now or followed Garrett's lead. No. She didn't want to do anything he had done. She shuddered, and pulled out her sketchbook. After pulling on her best jeans, a nice sweater, and her chucks, Ella sat in the large window seat and doodled until she heard the Benton family starting to stir. Jetty poked her head into Ella's room, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. "You're a morning

person, huh?" She shook her head, smiled, and headed into the restroom to shower.

"Ella?" Nessie walked in after Jetty vacated the doorway. "Here is your gift card. You earned it. From the sound of things, it was not the worst shoot in the world though." She winked. Ella had to agree with that. "I'm going to say this once, and I will not go on about it." She sat down next to Ella. "You are welcome to stay here as long as you like. I mean that. You are no trouble to us, and we actually like having you here, so I do not want you to think it's a burden or hassle. I only ask a few things. Always be truthful with us. The one thing I cannot tolerate is finding out after a fact that I've been fooled. Also, if for any reason you need to get anything from your house, let one of us know. Tell me if I'm intruding here, but I'd very much like myself or Daniel with you if you have to go back there. Finally, this Mr. Sweeny incident. I am under the impression that you want nothing to do with it. I will not push you on this, but I

want you to know that if you ever want to press charges, we will have your back. It will not be your word against his. You're a good kid. Ok?"

Ella was not sure what to say. She simply nodded and smiled as Nessie stood to leave.

"Grab a snack before you two go off adventuring, ok?" With that she was gone. Ella walked over to the bed, laid on her side facing away from the door, and cried. She wanted to hug Nessie, and cry. She wanted to tell her the whole story, everything that had ever happened, every scar, every pain. Nessie made her want to open up, and it scared her. She wished her mother was so kind, and caring. Ella was brought out of her daze by the feeling of someone sitting down on the edge of the bed.

"Hey. You ok?" Jetty was dressed, with her hair pulled back and up in a poofy pony tail.

"I will be." Ella wiped her eyes on her sleeves, and sat up. "Ready to shop?"

“As soon as we grab a bite to eat, and some mugs of coffee.” Jetty stood, and waited for Ella to come along before walking out the door.

# Chapter 7 - Threads

After finding a nice winter coat, several pairs of jeans, slacks, and three warm sweaters, the girls ambled through the food court. The mixing smells of coffees, pretzels, and various ethnic foods wafted through the air, blended into a scent that distinctly tagged the American shopping and theme park experience. Ella spotted Jack in the Box, and Jetty stood in line for Mark Pi. Each had large reusable shopping bags hanging over their shoulders. Gathering up their crazy blend of foods, over-priced coffees, and new belongings, the girls acquisitioned a table in the corner where they could see the whole area, and plan their next move.

“How about we drop off all these bags at my jeep while we’re on this side of the mall?” Ella suggested.

“Good idea.” They sat sipping their drinks, and engulfing their food far too quickly. The short lunch breaks public schools allow encouraged a quick paced lunch habit. As they stood to go, Ella’s phone buzzed. She looked at it as if it were going to bite her. She never got phone calls.

“Hello?” Ella listened as a nice girl from the studio explained that they needed more paperwork from her to process her paycheck for the time she spent as an extra the day before. “Sure! I’ll get that faxed right over in the next few days. Thanks!” Jetty watched as Ella’s face and demeanor fell.

“What’s up?” Jetty grabbed both of their trays, emptied them, and grabbed up her bags.

“I have to send in a copy of my birth certificate, and social so they can send me a paycheck.” Ella pulled the heavy bags over her shoulder as she spoke.

“That’s no big deal. They always do that. I had to also. Then they pay you pretty fast!” Jetty hoped that would cheer her friend up. It did not.

“Yeah, but mine are at home. I’ll have to sneak in when both my folks are gone to get them.” Ella sighed heavily. It was always something. Normal kids didn’t have to freak out over simple paperwork, or sneak into their own homes. She tried to quit comparing herself to normal. It did absolutely no good.

“I’ll drop you off, and run out there and grab my stuff. It shouldn’t take long.”

“Um, no. I do not even begin to think so, girl. I’m not letting you go there alone.” Jetty stuffed her bags into the Jeep’s back seat after Ella’s, and got into the car.

“I really don’t feel comfortable with you going there, and I do not think your folks would like it either.” Ella started the car, and backed out of the tight space, easily maneuvering around the crowded lot.

“They wouldn’t like you going there alone either. I thought Mom told you to ask one of them to go with you if you needed anything?”

“I’ll just run in and run out. If they come in on me, I’ll just leave. They probably haven’t even realized I’m not staying at home. Seriously. They never ask where I’ve been or where I’m going. They don’t care as long as I don’t make them look bad. My mom once said she wished I’d get pregnant so I’d be some other family’s problem.” Ella gave a sardonic laugh.

Jetty could not believe people like the Fusons actually existed. She’d only seen people that mean in movies and on TV. She trusted Ella, but surely she was exaggerating.

“At least let me wait in the car? If we go home first, Mom will want to know where you’re going. My parents do care where you are, and why.” Jetty folded her arms stubbornly.

“Fine. But I’m going to take the ignition key off my ring. If anything happens, take off.” Ella was being completely serious. “Are you freaking kidding me? Do you really think I would just bail on you if something bad happened? This is why we need to go get Mom or Dad.” Jetty was offended that Ella would think she’d just leave her to fend for herself.

“Sorry. It’ll be fine. I’m sorry I said that.” Ella took a deep breath, and drove on. She drove through the older section of suburbs to her little, bungalow house. At one time, right after WWII, the area had been posh, and high end. Now the old Craftsman houses were in decline, though still nice compared to other areas of the city. It was sunny, and warm for November. As Ella parked just out of view on the side street next to her house, she got out and looked all around the home for any sign of her parents. Both their cars were gone.

“They’re not here. Mom usually has bridge on Sundays. Dad’s probably with his buddies watching a high school

wrestling match. I'll be right back." She got out, closed the door, and rushed towards the back gate leaving a nervous Jetty alone in the car. Ella turned her key in the basement door lock, and gingerly made her way inside. She stood for a moment, listening to the house to be sure she was alone. Not a peep. Trying to remember where her parents had put her papers, she walked back into the unfinished side of the basement towards a large safe. She had seen her dad pull ledgers out of that safe many times, jotting payments, and debts owed to him down in it while his buddies drank, and played cards in the other room. Remembering the code by heart, she quickly unlocked the thick door, swung it open, and started rifling through for her documents. It took longer than she hoped, but soon she was holding her birth certificate, social security card, and a packet of medical and school records. She rolled them into a tube-shape, and stuffed them into her inner coat pocket. Looking to the back of the safe, the faded green ledger book was

poking up behind Daniel's hand gun case. Ella quickly pulled out her phone, and snapped a few images from inside the book. There had to be something useful in there. She carefully tucked it back into its original location. As she gingerly closed the door to the safe, and headed back towards the finished side of the basement, she ran face first into the chest of her father's best friend, Bill Deglow.

"What's the rush, jail-bate?" Bill leaned down so that his sweaty, beer-scented face was right next to her ear. "Hey, Nathan? Your little whore's home!" He yelled upstairs to her father, who was on his way down the stairs.

"Ignore her. We've got a game to watch." He gave Ella a look that said, get out of my sight or you're dead. It was pretty much the look he always gave her. Bill had another type of game in mind. "Nah! C'mon. She's just in time. You know how grouchy Amber's been. I haven't

gotten laid in weeks." Bill laughed loudly, and Ella's father snorted.

"Nah, just leave her alone. We can hit up one of the real girls later at the meeting. We need to be outta here pronto after the game. Stella's got her freakin' bridge party tonight." Nathan flopped down on the worn-out couch. Nathan wanted nothing to do with his wife's friends. The house had to be clean, smell nice, and all had to be on good behavior when the local garden club ladies came to the house. He hated them, but it added to the façade of the all-American good neighbor image that his warped mind truly believed in. Both men were obviously already quite drunk. Bill once more leaned in to Ella's face.

"I know you're worth it though. My oldest boy said his buddy paid you, and you purred like a kitten." Ella froze where she stood, unable to evade Bill, and scared. She looked over at her father. If Bill didn't shut up fast, she'd get the beating of a lifetime. Rumors about her selling

herself on the side always earned a beating, and were never true. Ella feared her father's beatings more than usual after the last one.

"I need to go." Ella forced the words out through trembling lips. "No, ya don't. NO she don't, does she, Nate?" He whirled around to his friend who was searching the TV for his game.

"How much for half an hour with her, bud? C'mon man. Sweeny got her for free unless you lost at cards again. After all the debts she's paid for ya, she's gotta be getting' pro. I'll give ya my beer money, man. Half an hour." Bill cackled, and pulled out his wallet. He was being completely serious.

"Bill!" Daniel looked up from his television laughing. "I don't give a damn if you fucking bang her! She's a freak. Knock her up, and she's your problem! I don't give a fuck anymore. You hear me, bitch? Useless whore!" Nathan's rage was growing, and Ella felt the blood leave her face as she trembled, trying to take at least a step up towards

an exit. Nathan stood up suddenly, and walked menacingly towards her. The two men stood between her and the outside door. It was all too familiar of a situation. Nathan backhanded her across the face.

“Ah. You don’t have to do that, man. I’ll take her upstairs. We need more beer from the fridge anyhow.” Bill seemed to be acting the savior. He had never been as brutal as her father, just much, much creepier. “Move it, kid.” Bill ushered her up the stairs, grabbing her ass as she got to the top of the landing. “Wrong way. I just saved you from a real beating. You owe me now.” He grabbed her arm as she headed for the front door, and pulled her towards the bedrooms. Her mind raced, as she thought about Jetty sitting outside. Surely, she’d seen these guys come in. She’d be freaking out, and rightly so. Bill was pushing her roughly down the hallway where there was no exit. He pushed her past her own room, and on to Garrett’s old room. He didn’t say a word

as he shoved her into the room which had been remade into a guest room years before.

“I need to go. My friend is waiting outside.” Ella whimpered, and looked to see if she could sprint around him. Bill was large. He had once been a nice-looking man that anyone would say was a retired football player. Now he was hulking, overweight, and smelled like a sickening mix of cigar smoke, beer and urine. His yellowed teeth showed in his wide grin as he clamped a hand around Ella’s arm.

“Bring her in. I can take two. I’ll pay double if the two of ya make out. Don’t play stupid and innocent. You been a pro since you were a kid. You ain’t a kid now.” Bill wedged her up against the small day bed so that her knees buckled, forcing her to fall back. He undid his pants, and leaned down to fumble at her pants. Ella pulled her phone out of her pocket, and dialed Jetty for help. Bill didn’t see or didn’t care. Jetty answered frantically.

“Ella? Get out here now!” Ella tried to hold the phone up, but Bill slapped it aside laughing. “Ella! Hey!” She got out of the car, and raced to the gate, which was now locked. “Shit!” She ended her call to Ella, and dialed 911.

Inside, Bill was pulling Ella farther up onto the rickety, old daybed, dragging down her pants as she went. She fought, begging him to get off of her. She tried to kick, but he had her pinned, ripping her shirt as he jammed an arm down the front. He was completely drunk, and she was just an object without a voice. She pulled his hair, and tried to hit him in the head, so he grabbed both of her hands in one of his hulking ones, and held them useless over her head, as he leaned his face down towards her. She cried, begged, and hoped someone would save her from this. No one ever had. She tried to shut off. Closing her eyes, she tried to be somewhere else. Between his weight pressing on her, and the pain, Ella was losing consciousness. She could hardly breathe. She heard a sickening crack, a burst of

stabbing pain in her chest, and she hoped she would finally die rather than face this once more. She could hear a sudden pounding that was getting louder. She was vaguely aware of shouting, and unfamiliar voices as she fell limp to the side of the bed. Someone was lifting her up, carrying her away. Someone was saying her name repeatedly. It was all a blur, then nothing.

# Chapter 8 – Ours Now

Jetty sat with Nessie and Daniel in the hospital waiting room. They weren't family, and Ella was a minor so none of them were allowed to go back yet. Jetty leaned into her mom's shoulder. She felt partially responsible. She had wanted to get her parents first before going there. She should have insisted. Ella's mother sat across from them, looking mortified and angry. As she was about to get up, a female police officer entered the room, and asked Mrs. Fuson to come with her to the hall. Nessie looked over at Daniel with concern.

"She is not going home with that woman, Dan. You make that happen. Call our lawyer. Call the mayor, I do not

care, but she is not going back to that house." Nessie's voice was angrier than Jetty had ever heard it. Her father got up, took out his phone, and walked out into the large open atrium-style lobby to find a quiet place to make some calls.

"Are you ok?" Nessie hugged her daughter tight. She was angry that they had not called her first, but now was not the time.

"I hate this. Why can't we see her?" Jetty was frustrated and scared.

"Shhhh. Honey, it'll be ok. We'll work this out. She's going to be ok. It's just a mess right now."

In the hallway, the police officer spoke firmly and politely to Stella.

"Ma'am, there was a lot of scarring on your daughter." The woman looked over her clipboard as she spoke.

"Did Bill crush her or something?" Stella rolled her eyes in irritation. The officer was struck by Stella's tone. It

was like she was embarrassed. She showed no compassion or concern for the girl whatsoever.

“When can we get out of here? This whole thing is ridiculous. I’m sure she came on to my husband’s friend. I’m sorry for all this. We’re going to get her into a group or something.” Stella tried to apologize profusely for her daughter’s horrid behavior.

“Ma’am, your husband’s friend was raping your little girl. She is a minor. Even if she had come on to him, it’s a crime, and the scarring that I’m referring to is older. She shows signs of multiple incidents of forced trauma. She also has a nasty black eye and laceration on her left cheek that’s a few days old. Any idea how that happened?” Officer Jen Cassick looked Stella dead in the eyes. She had not seen a case like this one in a long time. She had never had a parent defend the rapist before. That was new, and repulsive. Just when you thought you’d seen it all.

“I have no idea. She probably got it at school, or running around with her friends. Ask those people in the lobby who seem all up in our business!” Stella’s voice was rising in pitch and volume. “When can we leave?”

“Ma’am? You need to answer my questions honestly, and you need to lower you voice. You will not be taking Ella home today. She needs medical attention, and then we will be placing her in a temporary home for her safety until everything checks out.” Officer Cassick waited for a response.

Stella huffed, and waved her hand dismissively in the air, gesturing rudely at the Bentons.

“They can have her. We don’t want her back. I’ve said everything I know. Can I leave now?” Stella pulled her purse up over her shoulder, and pulled her keys out of her pocket.

“You can, but we’ll be calling on you. You and your husband are looking at criminal negligence at the very least.”

“Whatever!” Stella stormed down the hall passed the Bentons, and out of the hospital. Officer Cassick was stunned. She looked over at the Bentons, caught Nessie’s eye, and walked towards them.

“Are you all here for Ella Fuson?” Officer Cassick sat down across from them.

“Yes! How is she?” Nessie sat up taller, and Jetty did as well.

“I’m not really allowed to say anything to nonfamily, but her mother just said on record that she won’t take Ella back. From what I’ve seen that girl has no real family.” The officer handed the clipboard to Nessie. “We’ve got a lot going on here. She’s going to need a lot of support, stability, and love. I’m not child services. I do not place kids, but she needs people around her that give a damn. That’s all I’m saying.” She took the clipboard back from Nessie who had read over it briefly. Officer Cassik stood up, and walked back down the hall towards the room Ella was in.

Nessie looked out into the hospital's atrium at her husband. He was on his phone, gesturing wildly with his hands, and talking very fast. She wrapped an arm around Jetty and hugged her tightly again. The clipboard showed images that Nessie could never erase from her mind. The words 'scarring due to multiple incidents of forced trauma' made her blood boil. There were numerous mentions of old breaks that had not healed properly, and scars that could not be accounted for. Healed circular scars caused by burn marks on her back that were similar to cigar burns. Hearing that hag blame Ella for the attack…she needed to see the girl. She needed to know she was ok. She needed to make her ok. If she had not felt it before, Nessie was absolutely 100% sure that Ella was theirs now. The law, the Fusons, and the world be damned. That girl was coming home with them. As if on cue, Daniel walked back to them. His expression was positive, but firm.

“Ella will be coming home with us, at least temporarily. We have temporary custody. I just need to go sign a billion papers, and get it taken care of, but you two can go see her now.” Daniel sighed. Nessie and Jetty both leapt up, and hugged him. Jetty tried to keep from running to the elevators to see her friend. Nessie was close behind. They rode the elevator up in silence. Nessie entered the room first. Ella was asleep. She had been sedated. When she awoke earlier in a strange place, in pain, and half delirious her initial reaction was to flip out. She had tried to fight off the nurses around her. She now looked peaceful laying there. Nessie took the seat next to Ella’s bed, and Jetty sat across from them. Nessie took Ella’s hand in hers and gently rubbed it. How could someone she had only met days before be so totally engrained now in her heart? She might be 17, but she was still just a little girl, and she had been through more than any little girl ever should have to endure. It was going to be rough. Nessie knew there was

a big fight coming, but again; now was not the time. She looked over at Jetty who was watching for any signs that Ella was waking up.

“It might be a while, Hun. Her poor body needs rest.” Nessie sighed heavily once more. “She’s going to need us. A lot.” Nessie settled back in her chair. If Jetty had not been at that school, then she never would have met Ella, and this girl needed a friend and a chance. She believed with all her heart that things happened for a reason, and that this child would not have survived much longer in that home. She tried not to think about what would have happened if the police had been much longer getting to Ella’s home, or if Jetty had gone in after her. Several hours passed as Nessie sat dozing in her chair while Jetty played games on her phone. Ella woke up slowly, still groggy from the sedative. She saw Jetty sitting across from her bed, and Nessie on her side. Tears began to quietly roll down her cheeks. She was terrified, embarrassed, and ashamed; terribly, horribly ashamed.

She didn't want to draw their attention, so she closed her eyes back to fane sleep. Shifting slightly, a sharp pain in her ribs elicited a gasp that she was unable to withhold. Jetty dropped her phone in her lap, and jumped up from her seat, startling Nessie awake.

"Hey." Jetty sat beside Ella on the bed next to her mom.

"How are you feeling?" She was not sure what else to say. "Stupid." Ella could not meet their eyes.

She was mortified, and devastated that she had caused so much trouble. She should have listened. Both of them told her not to go there without one of the Bentons present. She looked down at herself. There was an IV that felt itchy in her left hand. Her ribs were bound tightly, so she guessed she had some broken ribs. No surprise considering how much he weighed, and how it had hurt her when he pressed her down on the bed. She continued to cry, no sobs, just a steady stream of slow, painful tears. Her lip was busted from the slap her father had delivered. His high school track state championship

ring did quite a job on her face this past week. She could not remember much after Bill pushed her down. That scared her as well. She finally looked up at Nessie after examining herself.

“Do they know what all Bill did to me?” She could not hold Nessie’s eye contact. She felt her cheeks burning with shame. “Yes.” Nessie squeezed Ella’s hand. She wanted to hug her, but any movement seemed to hurt her, and she wasn’t sure how Ella would handle a hug after all she had been through. How could anyone look at a child, and do something like this to them? How could monsters like this really exist? How did they walk around like normal people? Nessie sensed Ella’s shame, and her heart hurt for the girl.

“You get that this was not your fault, right?” She tried to get Ella to look her in the eyes, but it was futile.

“I’m so sorry.” Now the sobs she was trying to hold back due to pain and humiliation could not be stopped. “I should have called you guys. Jetty said I should, but I

figured I could sneak in and out. I'm sorry." She shook with painful sobs, and gasped from the pain as she hugged her midsection, and tried to lay back to catch her breath.

"Take slow, deep breaths, sweetie. Try to breathe for us." Nessie pushed the button for the nurse, and smoothed back Ella's hair, trying to calm her down. She winced each time Ella's face contorted from the awful sobs. Jetty stood back feeling scared and awkward, unable to do anything to help. The nurse bustled into the room, and checked Ella's IV line, and blood pressure.

"I need you to try to calm down for me, Ella. Try to take slower breaths. You have a few cracked ribs so I know that's feeling pretty tricky right now. Could you tell me how your pain rates? 1 being not so bad, and 10 being 'Knock me out now, lady.'" This caused Ella to give the smallest grin.

"About a 6." Ella started breathing more evenly.

“Hmm. An honest one!” The nurse smiled. “Most people claim it’s an 11.” She grinned warmly at a distraught Jetty, and patted her arm as she passed. “You’re looking really good, sweetie. We should have you out of here in a few hours.” She left the room, closing the door as she did to give them privacy.

Ella was horrified. All her inhibitions were wiped away as fear took over.

“Can I stay with you guys tonight? Please? Please don’t let them take me home. Please?” She held onto Nessie’s hand, begging. “Oh, Honey! You’re never going back there. Daniel already set it up. You’re coming home with us.” Nessie looked over at Jetty, who was silently crying, and hugging herself. Even if it killed her, she was not going to let anyone else hurt this child on her watch. The look of relief that fell over the girl’s face was incredible. Jetty had Ella’s jacket with all of her important papers inside. The nurse had handed it to her on her way into the room. She collected Ella’s other belongings, and

stuffed them in her own bag. Jetty gave Ella's foot a squeeze then smiled at her, and excused herself to run out to her mother's car for Ella's new clothes. She walked quickly through the winding halls, down the elevator, and out to the main atrium lobby which had become filled with a very recognizable sort causing Jetty's stomach to turn. Paparazzi. Gambling that the leaches would be too busy hassling the front desk, and nurses for information to notice her, she ran out to the car as fast as she could. Jetty grabbed the clothes, snuck in a side entrance, and hurried back up to her mom. When she returned to the room, Nessie was helping the nurse ease Ella into a sitting position. It looked incredibly painful. Jetty stood back, and placed the bag of clothing on the small table in the room that held a cup of ice chips, and a box of juice.

"Thanks, Jetty." Ella asked for the bag of clothes. "Might as well try to get dressed now." She was not looking forward to having to raise her arm up to put on the

sweater, or bending to get into her jeans. She wished she had bought some pajamas now.

Nessie's phone vibrated in her coat. She reached for it, hoping it was Daniel. Nessie groaned as she recognized the name. Max Lippen. Notorious tabloid slime. She had dealt with him on one other occasion at a charity ball. He had not picked on her as she and Daniel offered no juicy news, but she had witnessed his antics towards other celebrities, and it disgusted her. She opened the entire message with morbid curiosity.

"*Vanessa, I know you won't believe this, but I'm doing you a solid here. Your name has been leaked in association with a major case that is hitting the national press as we speak. I didn't believe it when I heard, but your name is being linked to a major under-aged prostitution ring. They have no idea how you are linked, but all they hear is your name and under-age prostitution. Putting two and two together, your kid's name is getting thrown into some pretty trashy articles*

*even by my standards. You can imagine how that is huge for folks like me. Miss squeaky clean? Prostitution? So, lay it on me and I'll save your family's rep. You know well I have ruined a few, but I can save them as well. I wouldn't give many celebs the benefit of this, and you know it, so let me in, and we'll do damage control. -Max"*

"We'll wait out in the hall." Nessie motioned for Jetty to come with her as the nurses helped Ella dress. Once they were in the hall, Nessie went ahead and told Jetty what Max had told her. Jetty was understandably angry, and sickened.

"He's right about one thing. I've never known him to give anyone the benefit of the doubt. I'll have your father speak to him after I calm him down. Poor Ella." Nessie shook her head. She would be at the courthouse a lot. She would try her best to make sure Ella had very little time there. Daniel walked up as they were talking, and Nessie filled him in.

“Yes. I heard. It’s already on the local paper’s website, and people are not being kind in their comments. It took every bit of restraint I possess not to type out a comment, but I spoke to our lawyer, and he’s on it. He contacted the paper about spreading false information, and mentioned a defamation of character lawsuit that they might not want to be party to. He is working overtime. I told him to do whatever he needed. He’s digging up information on Ella’s father, and her older brother.” Jetty looked at him in shock.

“Ella has a big brother?” Jetty was surprised Ella never mentioned that. “Where is he?”

“He died when she was nine-years-old. He committed suicide, but the family covered it up. There was a lot more to it, but I can’t talk about that now. Tom does good work. He can be very persuasive with the locals.” Nessie wondered exactly what that meant, considering she had hit a dead end where the brother was concerned, and she knew she had exhausted all normal

avenues of knowledge. Short of holding a gun to someone's head, she really didn't care what Tom did so long as it helped Ella's case.

They walked back into Ella's room. She was dressed, and standing with the help of a nurse who was helping her sit back into a wheelchair. Jetty gathered up Ella's things, and took control of the chair. Daniel had already taken care of her release papers. They were free to go. An old nurse, who had just gotten off the elevator approached the group.

"Sir?" She stopped Daniel. "You all really should follow me out the employee exit. There are reporters outside the two main entrances, and they're pestering everyone who comes and goes." She looked sympathetically at Ella and Jetty.

"Thanks." Daniel led the others after her, and started making calls. Ten minutes later, a large town car pulled up in front of them.

“Here’s our ride. We’ll come back for the car later.” They eased Ella into the passenger seat, and the Bentons piled into the back.

# Chapter 9 - Ted

That night, Nessie told Jetty to just take it easy, and do whatever she could to help Ella feel at home, safe, and relaxed. She was not to answer the phone, or

turn the TV on unless they were watching a movie. They were on lockdown. The news that Bill was out on bail frightened Nessie, but Daniel assured her they were safe. He had to go to the set that evening, so he hired a security guard from the set to sit out front just in case. He hated that he could not stay with them, but Nessie and Jetty wouldn't let him cause the film to be held up. Daniel walked onto the lot that evening; business as usual. On the set at least, everyone was respectful, and said nothing about the rumors, and stories, at least not to him for most of the night. After a grueling shoot that involved the actors standing in the pouring artificial rain for hours at a time, he called for a break.

"Dan? Can I talk to you?" Ted Amburgey walked over to Daniel's director's chair while the others had scattered for the craft service tables.

"Sure. I promise not to drown you, if that's a concern." Daniel smiled. Ted was a nice kid, and not full of himself yet.

“How’s Ella doing?” He sat down on a speaker next to Daniel’s chair.  Daniel studied Ted for a moment, trying to decipher his motives. His instinct was to think Ted was worried about his own career after spending a day flirting with heron screen, and on set. He knew stuff like that was tabloid fodder, and if anyone broke the confidentiality agreement, it could get out, and hurt his image of up and coming leading man. On the other hand, depending on the image he was going for, it could actually help him by making him look like a bad boy. Neither pleased Daniel.

“She's getting better. A few broken ribs. How can I help you, Ted?”

Ted leaned back, reproached.

“I’m not asking for anything. I really just wanted to know she’s ok. I don’t believe the crap her folks are claiming. She had a black eye yesterday. That wasn’t stage makeup was it?” He felt foolish even asking.

“Nope. That was real. Some of her dad’s handy work. I’ll let her know you asked about her. It might cheer her up.”

“Would you mind if I stopped by sometime this week before we head to Vancouver?” Sitting there, Ted looked so much younger than nineteen. He just looked like a worried kid with a crush. Daniel felt for him.

“I hate to say this, but are you sure you wouldn’t mind people seeing you visiting Ella? With all the publicity, and controversy?” He was testing Ted.

“I know my agent will be pissed, but I really don’t want to leave without talking to her, and seeing her for myself. Is that ok?”

“I’ll text Nessie for permission. You gotta get through Mama Bear if you want to see the cubs. If she says it’s ok, I don’t have any problem with it. Granted, I’ll break your knees if you make her cry.” Daniel grinned in a way that made Ted not so sure he was joking.

“Thanks?” Ted stood, and walked back to his mark for the next shot.

# Chapter 10 – Gathering Knowledge

"Ah! Have you ever seen 'The Philadelphia Story'?" Jetty excitedly held up a DVD case with Cary Grant, Katherine Hepburn, and Jimmy Stewart on the cover. "I love classic Hollywood movies."

Even if it hadn't looked like a good movie, Ella wouldn't have been able to say no to Jetty's excited face. Plus, it was her home. Ella eased back into the pile of comfy pillows Jetty had stuffed behind her on the settee, and nodded her approval. She was feeling much better. She felt safe, and unbelievably thankful. No one had ever stuck up for her before. No one had ever shown her so much kindness as the Bentons had over the course of

the past week. Somewhere, buried deep down under all the years of abuse and pain, she still had hope and faith that she was not worthless. A tiny spark that refused to burn out despite the trajectory her life had followed up until now. What should have been the worst thing to happen to her in her life, a sexual assault by her dad's friend, was just another day for her. What stood out was the fact that at the moment, she was laying safe and warm on a bed of fluffiness, surrounded by people who cared for her. She fell asleep feeling more at ease than she had in years.

The next day, Jetty begged to stay home from school, but Nessie insisted that if she was going to commit to graduating from a real school, she had to obey the rules. No more skipping. Jetty borrowed her mom's car, and Ella's parking pass, and even picked up Emma and Henry since Ella was going to be out for a while. She was very thankful that both were busily groping once more in the backseat. She didn't feel like

answering any of their questions. Throughout the day, she heard rude comments about herself and Ella, and disbelief that a family like the Bentons had taken Ella in. Some people were kind, and told her to tell Ella they hoped she felt better soon. Others were hateful, and said things that echoed Ella's father's claims.

"You living with Ella?" A tall, heavy boy stood over Jetty as she fumbled with her locker latch.

"Yes." Jetty tried to ignore the boy, but he was not moving away, and stood menacingly close as she turned to get to orchestra class.

"Soon as she comes back here, she's gettin' it. My dad didn't fucking rape nobody, but if that's the sorta thing she likes, we can make her freak fantasies come true." He sneered at her, and knocked her backpack off her arm, causing her to lose balance with her arms full of books. She toppled over into the locker with a thud. Unhurt, but frightened, Jetty stood back up, and stepped

around the hateful boy, and tried to calmly walk away. He yelled after her in a hall full of other kids.

“Ella Fuson is a fucking whore, and every guy in school knows it! Just ask Mr. Sweeny!” Jetty heard muffled nervous laughs all around. It was unreal. It was like something out of a bad made-for-TV special. She relaxed somewhat as she walked into the band room, and retrieved her French horn. The assistant band director was in front of the class filling in for Mr. Sweeny, who would never be returning to the school, or any other school for that matter. It took him a long time to hush the group. Jetty heard one of the girls in front of her speaking in a loud whisper to her stand partner.

“I saw Mr. Sweeny take Ella into one of the soundproof practice rooms after school once. He covered up the window so I knew they were doing something.” Jetty’s head snapped towards the girl. That was exactly what Ella had said happened. Jetty leaned down to the girl, and tapped her on her shoulder.

“Hi. Would you know what day that happened?” Jetty mentally crossed her fingers. The girl was a freshman, and was thrilled Jetty Benton was even talking to her.

“Yes! It was October Twenty-fifth. I had to stay after school because my mom’s minivan got a flat so I was practicing for site reading medals.” She looked up at Jetty expectantly like she had just earned a treat for this juicy gossip.

“Thank you! What was your name again?” Jetty extended a hand to shake.

“Jenny Congell. Hi! I love your dad’s movies. That is so cool that you moved here.” The girl was positively giddy. Jetty had met many fan girls who only wanted to be around her because her dad was famous. She’d learned not to take it personally, but had also learned the hard way that such meetings seldom ended in the making of an actual friend. Jenny seemed like a nice girl at least. Jetty sat back in her chair, thankful that the band director called them to attention for the start of class. He

announced that he would be teaching the class for the rest of the quarter until they were able to hire a replacement for Mr. Sweeny.

“OK, ok. I do not want to hear another word about Mr. Sweeny in this class. You got me? The vice principal wants to say a few words to you guys before class, but after that, nada! I mean it. I’ll start taking away solos if I have to.” Mr. Brinkley crossed his arms while scratching his nose with his conducting baton. Mr. Whipple, the high school vice-principal, was a stocky red-haired man in his late sixties. In his youth he had earned the name ‘fireball’, but in later years he was much more reminiscent of an orange than a fireball.

“Settle down, everybody. I will not come in here pestering you all again, but I was asked to see if any of you wanted to come forward with any more information about Mr. Sweeny. Many of you heard that he named names to the court to get a deal, and some of those names have not come forward on their own.” He looked

around the room, specifically letting his gaze land on the violin section where several girls squirmed uneasily in their seats. “You aren’t going to get in any trouble. Just ask to see your councilor in private sometime soon, and let them know anything you know. Anyone with more information is encouraged to do the same. Ok. Let’s put this whole mess behind us. Have a nice day.” He gave a nod to Mr. Brinkley, and walked out of the room. As soon as he’d left, the room was buzzing with nervous whispers, and pointing fingers, followed by angry voices. Mr. Brinkley ran his baton tip slowing against the chalkboard, eliciting a shrill screech that brought everyone to attention.

“No more! Not in my class, you hear? You follow what he said. If you have anything to say on the matter, you go to your councilors. Alright. Let’s get to work.”

# Chapter 11 – Reality Break

Ted pulled up to the driveway of the Benton's. He was stopped as he entered by the security guard Mr. Benton had put in place before leaving his girls alone for an entire day. The guard checked Ted's ID even though he knew who he was, and let him through. Ted was getting a bit uneasy. What if Ella didn't want to see him? She had just been through hell, and he had been making out with her on camera for a day. What was he thinking? He suddenly felt the urge to run, but he wanted to see her. He really liked Ella. She was real, and sweet, and had seemed completely unfazed by who he was on screen. In fact, he was pretty sure she didn't have a clue who he

was prior to their first meeting. He'd met thousands of screaming, groping people who just wanted to touch him, rip his clothes, grab off his glasses…It was gross. It was like they thought something important would rub off if they could just touch him. It reminded him of an old Sunday school lesson he'd heard when he was a kid back in Whitesburg, Kentucky. The woman who touched Jesus's garb. Only he was no holy man, and all he felt leave him when those hoards touched him without permission was little bits of dignity. Ted stepped out of his rental car, and cautiously approached the door Daniel had instructed him towards. His stomach was in knots as he rang the doorbell. He had not felt this nervous since he auditioned for his first real role. After several minutes, Nessie came to the door glowering at him. This did nothing to make him feel at home.

"Hi. Would it be ok if I visited Ella for a while?" Ted felt like a fool in front of Nessie.

“Come on in.” She stood back so that he could walk past her, and led him into the living room where Ella was propped up on pillows, watching a Disney film.

Ted walked around the couch, and took a seat on the lounger across from her. Ella’s face lit up when she saw him. She couldn’t believe he was actually bothering to come see her.

“Hi.” He spoke first. “How are you feeling?”

He saw her face, now with no makeup to hide the bruises. Her lip was now busted as well. He frowned, wishing for nothing more than to pound away at the man who had busted the same soft lips he had been kissing days earlier.

“Not so bad. I just kind of have to lie around like a sloth for a while. I broke my ribs.” She grinned, hoping to erase the frown from his face. Ted took note of how she said she broke her ribs like it had happened during a hike, or some normal accident. He moved over to the

couch to talk to her once Nessie finally left her unnerving perch on the stairs overlooking them.

“Does it hurt?” He motioned to her cheek, moving closer, but trying not to be too close. He knew it was a stupid question. He just wanted to keep talking, unsure of what to say.

“A little. It’s ok though.” She smiled at him, and looked him in the eyes. He was being so sweet, and acted like he really wanted to be there. “Are you finished filming in town? Daniel said last night that you guys were heading to Canada next week to film the rest.” She spoke, and found the words added a hint of sadness to her voice. She didn’t like that he wouldn’t be in town anymore, even though she knew it was silly. He was not her boyfriend. She had not ever had a boyfriend. Henry was the closest she’d ever come to a boyfriend, and that was simply because he was male, and tolerated her friendship. Ted’s presence made her feel at ease. She’d never felt at ease around other boys; quite the opposite.

There had never in her life been a time when she was left alone with a male that had not involved her being hurt. He was sitting just inches away, and she didn't feel awkward, or like she had to worry about him saying something mean or hateful. It might have been the security of her surroundings, but for once she wasn't feeling intimidated.

"Yeah. I fly out there tomorrow to get settled in." He saw her smile fade, but quickly return, and it gave him courage. "I wanted to come see you before I left town." He sat back, examining her. "I got you something." He pulled a little black velvet pouch out of his coat pocket, and handed it to her.

"What is it?" She smiled at it in surprise.

"Open it and see." She unfastened the drawstring around the opening of the pouch, and shook the contents out into her palm. She held up the bracelet by its black, satin cord, and read the inscription.

“B.O.S.K.? Bosk?” She looked up at him and laughed. “What does it mean?” She was confused. Was it another language?

Ted gingerly took the bracelet from her, and fastened it around her wrist.

“B.O.S.K. Best On-Screen Kiss.” He gave her a huge smile as she grinned back.

“I love it, but I’m pretty sure you’re just being kind.” She cautiously hugged into him. He was warm, and felt so good to lean into.

“Not even a little.” He turned and bent down so he could see her face. “You were my very first on screen kiss, and I had to kiss Cami a lot all this week.” He smirked at the scowl Ella gave him, and the playful hit to his arm. “It was awful. I really hope my acting was great because there was zero chemistry between me and her. After every take, she had her assistant run over with hand sanitizer and mouth wash. She’d swish and spit right off screen. It was disgusting.” He shuddered at the imagery.

“Can we maybe not talk about you kissing another girl right now?” Ella was surprised at her own forwardness, but the last thing she wanted to hear right now was about him kissing a famous film star, especially a pretty one.

“Yes ma’am.” He leaned in, and gently kissed her cheek, trying not to cause her any pain as her cheek was still swollen. Ella felt the tiniest sting, but could not care less. Ella didn’t even care if anyone was still watching from the stairs.

“You were my first real kiss.” Ella laid her head against Ted’s chest.

“On screen?” Ted knew the answer, but he liked hearing her say it.

“Ever.” She hugged into him, not wanting to let go. It was unfathomably cruel that he was leaving town in the morning. She didn’t want him to go. She knew that was foolish, but it was also true. Ted had no way of knowing what Ella had been through other than what he gleamed

from the news, and how his kind gestures and nature warmed her heart.

“Do you mind if I text and call you from Canada?” He pulled out his cellphone, and held it out to take a photo of the two of them. He rested his chin on the top of her head, holding her against him as tight as he could without causing any pain to her ribs. He wished he could stay and keep her safe. He wished she could come to Vancouver with him. Anyone who had ever hurt her would be an entire country away. He knew from the papers that she would be facing a horrible time soon. Lawyers, trials, and being called things that made Ted want to beat someone’s head in. Ted felt protective of Ella. He had never hit another human being other than during a pretend stage fight.

“I’d like that.”

“Good.” He checked himself several times to be sure he was not just having a crush because of the situation they were placed in on set. His feelings for Ella were real.

They just clicked. The first time he talked to her over a badly played game of five-card-draw he felt it. He looked at his watch and frowned. He would need to be getting back to his hotel soon, or risk excruciating pain from Daniel Benton…or worse, Nessie. Vanessa Benton may be a Broadway diva, but she was also very scary when protecting her own.

“Well, I’d better be going. I have to pack up my hotel room before my flight leaves tomorrow, and it is a mess.” Ted got up, leaned down for a final kiss, and headed out towards the kitchen. Ella sighed deeply without even realizing it as she watched him go, to the great amusement of Nessie who was now in the doorway to the kitchen with her eyebrows cocked in mock surprise.

“So, I guess that went well?”

“Yeah. Very, very well.” Ella could hardly let herself believe how well it had gone.

# Chapter 12 – Back at School

Jetty rammed her French horn case into its cubby in the band storage room, and slung her backpack over her shoulder. She had study hall in the huge library next. She hoped she could risk sneaking a peak at her phone without being caught by the study hall teacher. She spotted a desk that was mostly blocked from view by a cart filled with books waiting to be re-shelved, and plopped down her things. As she pulled out her notebook, she felt a sharp shove at her desk.

“Are you ok?” She started, looking up from her page. Her demeanor went from placid to agitated instantly as Mike

towered over her, unseen by the room monitor or teacher as he was hidden by the book stacks.

“Your friend better quit spreading shit about my dad.” He kneeled down to whisper loudly without being heard. “You people come to town, and think you know everybody. Ella has you fooled good. That girl’s been whorin’ since she was a toddler. She’s a whore, and a liar, and she came on to my dad. I’m going to say so in court. So’s her own dad and mom. She’s even more screwed than usual.” He hissed through gritted teeth.

“You need to get away from my desk right now. Your dad raped Ella. End of story. She’s a minor. At the very least, he’s committed statutory rape. He nearly killed her.” Jetty was getting worried by his closeness, and anger. He was practically snarling at her.

“She asked him to! She wanted it. That girl has been plowed more times that a farm field. Half her brother’s football team did her, including Garrett! That’s sick. She did her own brother. That’s how sick she is.” He laughed

and got right down in Jetty's face. He smelled like sweat and cigarettes. It made Jetty want to gag. She wanted this idiot to keep talking, so she goaded him on while fumbling to turn on the voice recording app on her phone.

"She never wanted you. I can't believe she'd want anyone in your family." Jetty kept him talking. It wasn't exactly hard.

"Yeah, right! I could have her easy. My dad had her any time he wanted. Her dad doesn't give a fuck about her. He's a good guy, and he's got this loser for a kid. My cousin bought her ass years ago. She's a freakin' whore. At least her bro got some money off it for a while. Guys would go down in the basement, and they got to do stuff based on how much they paid. My cousin said he nailed her on the couch for just fifty bucks, and she loved it. Ella ruined everything. Garrett got accused of doing shit on his own, so he shot himself. That's fucked up. It wasn't his fault. I'd sell my sister too if she was a slut like Ella.

You don't know these people. I'm helping you out here. Seriously. It's not your fault since you never knew how she worked, but now you know, so back the fuck off my family. If you been one of Dan's girls like they say I'll be seeing you again real soon, just so you know. After all this, he owes us Deglows some freebies." He looked her over before standing up, and waited for some sort of affirmation from Jetty.

"I got ya." She looked down at her paper, avoiding eye contact. Mike took this as evidence that he had made his point, and he walked out of the library through the back door that led outside to the courtyard. Jetty waited till he had left the room, and reached down to shut off her recorder. She desperately hoped she caught all that on the recorder. Jetty's stomach hurt, and she felt nauseous. She pulled her pack back on her shoulder, and walked over to the teacher's desk. It was the last period of the day anyhow. She asked to go to the nurse.

“Just head on home, dear. I’ll write you a hall pass to go out to your car. Please tell Ella I wish her well, and I’d be happy to get books together for her studies if she’d like.” Unlike the head Librarian, Mrs. Williams was a sweetheart. She wrote the permission slip out, handed it to Jetty, and went back to grading papers from her other classes. Jetty walked out to the car, got in, and leaned her head against the cool glass. She felt awful. She was glad she captured that audio, but who was she going to play it for. She didn’t want to let Ella hear it. Ella had been through enough over the past few days. She would have to play it for her parents, and that made her feel sick. Nessie and Daniel had been shielding the girls from news coverage. So, they were saying she was a prostitute now too? It made her want to throw up. She knew none of it was Ella’s fault, but she felt like she was stabbing her in the back by showing the recording to anyone. She weighed her options, and decided she had to. She decided her mother was the one to show it to.

Nessie was more understanding, and less blunt than her father who always saw things as black and white. Jetty started the jeep, and drove home feeling like she'd been kicked. She walked into the house, dropped her backpack on the kitchen table, and went to the fridge for something cold to drink that could settle her nervous stomach.

"Young lady, is that where your pack belongs?" Nessie entered the room, and gave Jetty a hug. "Are you ok? You're home early." She turned Jetty around to look her over. Her daughter did not look good.

"What's up?"

"I need to show you something, but it's really bad. Is Dad here? Where's Ella?" She looked around Nessie for any sign of her father or Ella.

"Your dad is helping out on the last day of shooting in town today. He leaves for Canada late tonight. I can call him home if it's urgent. Ella just took a heavy dose of pain meds, and is sleeping it off in her room." She looked

concerned. Jetty rarely exaggerated so if she said something was bad, it was very bad.

“I just want to show you alone. Can we go down to your studio? It’s an audio file.” Jetty pleaded.

“Yeah. Sure. Lead the way, Honey.” Now it was Nessie’s turn to get a rock in the pit of her stomach. She followed Jetty down to her studio room, and shut the sound-proof door. Jetty handed her phone to Nessie, and she plugged it into her speakers.

“Give me a little warning here. What am I about to listen to?” “Bill’s son came up to me at study period. He didn’t hurt me or anything.” She added, seeing the horror on Nessie’s face. “He went off on me though about Ella. I got him to say some stuff I’d heard him mention before. It’s really bad. Please don’t think bad things about her after you hear this.” Jetty implored her mother before sitting behind her on a stool, not wanting to see her face as she listened to the recording.

As Mike's hateful voice played loudly in the studio in crisp clear tones, Nessie felt her blood pumping faster, and sat back in her chair as the recording clicked off. She cleared her throat, and turned to face Jetty.

"My dear girl, how could you think I would think less of her after hearing that? If anything, I'm even more impressed that she's the amazing person I know, and has not let this destroy her. None of that was her fault. None of it. Every one of those boys broke the law. Her parents broke the law by allowing it to happen. Those people disgust me. I can't even put into words how revolting they are to me!" Nessie's fists were clenched, and she could feel her heartbeat in her ears. She took deep breaths, trying to calm her shattered nerves. She held her arms out for Jetty to hug her. She squeezed her daughter in a giant bear hug. It was beyond imagination that anyone could treat a child, let alone their own, so horribly. It sounded to her like something that only

happened in third world countries, but she knew that was an incredibly ignorant way to think about it.

“I do need to talk about this with your dad. It’s going to come out sooner or later, and he deserves to be in the know. He’ll call Tom, and the two of them will figure out how this information can help Ella’s case. That last bit about Ella’s dad is pretty damning. I’m sorry the idiots at the local paper ran that article saying you had any involvement. I wouldn’t show this to Ella. It would only hurt her more. I’m sure she’s heard it all, and far worse.”

Jetty nodded, having already determined she was not going to play it for Ella. She hoped her friend was getting some much-needed rest.

Ella awoke gently to the sound of classical guitar playing low throughout the house. Carefully, she eased herself to the edge of her bed, grabbed the side of the headboard, and stood with a little less pain than the last time she had maneuvered from a laying position. Jetty

came running through the hall, skidding to a halt at Ella's door.

"I heard you getting up from downstairs. Are you ok?" Ella yawned, and held out the wrist with the bracelet Ted had given her earlier for Jetty to examine it.

"Bosk? That's a weird pet name." Jetty laughed.

"Best onscreen kiss," Ella explained. Jetty's eye went wide.

"That is the single most romantic thing that I have ever seen in my life! Details! Let's go downstairs first though." Jetty practically dragged Ella, before remembering she needed to be gentle. "Oh shoot. Sorry. Will going downstairs be too painful?"

"How about we stay put instead? That way if it's really painful, I'll be at my bed so I can collapse for the evening."

"That sounds better." Jetty helped her lie back down, making sure pillows were propped under her

comfortably. As soon as she was certain Ella was situated comfortably, she flopped down next to her on the bed.

“Ok. Spill it. How did it go?”

Ella smiled broadly, and could not contain the goofy sigh that escaped her mouth. She told her about the bracelet, and how he had placed it on her wrist. She shyly described how he had told her the actress he had to kiss was awful, and how she’d told him she did not really care to hear about him kissing other girls. Then she told her about how he kissed her.

“Whoa. No fair! I want a sweet, Kentucky boy too!” Jetty pouted in mock dejection. “But seriously, Ell, that is the sweetest thing I have ever heard. I am so happy for you. So, are you guys a thing? Like dating officially?” Ella thought about it. She honestly wasn’t sure.

“I don’t know. I guess we are. He said he wanted to text and call me while he’s in Canada.” Ella was new to dating. She did not know if there were any rules, or what was considered dating or just good friends. She was

fairly sure that the kisses they shared moved past the, 'just friends,' label though. As she started to speak again, her phone vibrated. It was a message from Ted. It was the photo he had taken of them. She looked at the photo, and her heart melted. Even with half of her face beaten up, she looked happier than she had ever been in her lifetime. Ella held her phone up to show Jetty, who felt a tiny pang of something very similar to jealousy before getting over it, and squeeing like a rabid fan girl.

"Ella! That is the cutest photo ever! I have to have a copy of that. Ted really likes you." She reached over and patted Ella's head, afraid to hug her lying down because of her ribs. "Oh my gosh, that's adorable!" She handed Ella's phone back to her. She suddenly wished she had kept in contact with her friends Eric, and Andrea back in California as she crushed on both of them.

"I'm really going to miss him. It'll be ok though. Up until today, I'd never had a boyfriend before. I can handle him not being around for a while. I think." She consented. "I

will probably drive him bonkers with texting though." She giggled. Giggles hurt far less than Ella's usually belly laughs.

"We'd better head down for dinner. Mom and Dad were talking to the lawyer this afternoon, and Dad said Tom really needs to speak to you." Jetty still felt guilty about the recording, but knew she did the right thing.

"Sure." Ella felt uneasy about speaking to a lawyer. With the exception of the Bentons and a few teachers, Ella didn't have a great track record dealing with adults. She was feeling very hungry now though.

"It'll be ok. Tom is really nice for a lawyer. He's known Dad since college." Jetty consoled Ella, seeing her frightened look.

They walked downstairs, and could hear Nessie singing in the kitchen as she cooked.

"What's for dinner?" Jetty smiled. She could tell her mom's mood based on what kind of music she was

listening to or singing at the time. Tonight, it was old jazz standards. That usually meant she was stressed out.

“Braised chicken, steamed veggies, and basmati rice. Could you set the table? It’s just about finished.” She motioned the girls towards the cupboards. They worked obediently to set the table, and then Jetty poured a glass of lemonade for herself and Ella, who she had learned loved lemonade any time any place. Mr. and Mrs. Fuson hated the stuff, so she rarely got any. They took their seats around the large table made from several thick butcher blocks hewn together. It was the most massive, awesome table Ella had ever seen. Daniel had told Ella that it was this table that actually sold them on the house. They almost tried to buy one of the old local landmark homes that had once belonged to an industrial giant. It sat on a busy corner down the road from their current home, and it was made of hand-carved stones, even owning several dozen gargoyles guarding atop its many spires. While Ella would have loved the

opportunity to get into the old house, Jetty had been very relieved that they had not bought it as it looked like every scary filmset she'd ever seen wrapped into one. Jetty knew better than most that movies were just make believe, but it didn't make her any less frightened of the horror movies and tales of suspense.

"Thanks." Ella sat next to Jetty at the table. They ate dinner quickly, chatting about the days' less stressful events as they did. "How was your visit, Ella?" Nessie smiled, hoping it had been fun after the week she had experienced.

"It was really nice." Ella was not sure whether she should tell Nessie about the bracelet or not, but she felt safe enough to do so, so she held her wrist up, and shook the bracelet out from her sweatshirt sleeve.

"He gave me this."

Nessie and Daniel admired the pretty trinket, and both stared quizzically at the inscription. The meaning dawned on Daniel before Nessie, and he grinned.

“Nicely played, Ted.” He commented, much to Nessie’s frustration as she was usually the first to decrypt practically everything. “Best Onscreen Kiss.”

Nessie felt silly for not getting that right away, and laughed. It was a brilliant and charming gift. Any girl would swoon from such a thing. She started to warm a bit to the boy, although she would still break him like a twig if he hurt Ella in any way. After dinner, Daniel and Nessie asked Jetty to go on upstairs so they could speak to Ella about some very important things regarding her case, and her living situation. Though she protested, Jetty finally ascended the stairs to get ready for bed since she still had to go back to school the following morning. Ella followed the Bentons into the living room, and positioned herself comfortably on the large couch once more. It was one of the few places she could rest without aggravating her injuries. Daniel sat next to Nessie across from Ella.

“Ella, Tom spoke to me today about some things you could do immediately that would help improve your situation. First, he mentioned that you could become an emancipated minor, giving yourself control over your finances, legal counsel, etc. Second, he said he wants to get a deposition from you about what happened with Mr. Sweeny, and with Bill for starters. Today, a witness for the defense really put his foot in his mouth, and offered up a lot of incriminating evidence against your family, Bill, and others who have hurt you in the past. Unfortunately, this person was caught on tape without realizing it, so his words can’t be used in court as evidence, but they are proof. Tom will need to ask you some really uncomfortable stuff, but hopefully we can keep you off the stand as much as possible this way. Would you be willing to meet with him tomorrow? Nessie will go with you.”

Ella was scared. She’d never fared well with people in authority, and talking to a lawyer sounded an

awful lot like going to the principal's office for something you didn't do. She knew she had to get it over with though. Daniel had released a statement to the press on Jetty's and Ella's behalf that evening, and things were starting to look more positive. She nodded her head.

"I can do that." She was curious to find out what this new witness had said that was so incriminating. It made her nervous to wonder who had talked. Her brother's friends were all grown, and many still lived in town, but she could not imagine any of them saying anything. The only person she could think of was Bill or his son, Mike. Mike was her age, and had always taunted her, pushed her around, and generally treated her like dirt. He never messed with her though out of some sick respect for his dad, and cousin. He acted like he would get in trouble if he played with his father's toys. The more she thought about it, the more Ella was certain it had to have been Mike spouting off like the immature brat that he was. Bill was Ella's father's boss at the plant. They had been

friends since they were kids, and Nathan thought Bill could do no wrong, so he let him do whatever he wanted. Bill had groped Ella right in front of Nathan many times, and Nathan just laughed, and told him he was too good for her. Ella wished Bill had believed him.

“OK. You’ve had a long day. I’ll let you get up to bed, kiddo. Need any help?” Nessie offered her hands to boost Ella up out of her sitting position.

“No. It’s not so bad as long as I’m slow and careful.” She grinned weakly, and headed upstairs.

She slept in until almost noon before Nessie came in to wake her.

“Hey, Sleepyhead. I let you sleep in because you seriously needed it, but we need to get you up now. We’re meeting with Tom after lunch, ok?”

“OK.” Ella was groggy as she rolled her legs off of the bed, and eased herself into a standing position. She had to have Nessie’s help to wrap the waterproof wrap

around her for her shower. It was a painful endeavor, but the pain was less today than it had been yesterday so she could not really complain.

“Is Tom a nice guy?” Ella was beginning to feel nervous. She had always heard lawyers were sleazy, and money-grubbing. She had never met one in person. When she was little, and the social workers had temporarily taken her from her home, she only dealt with them, and the foster service. She never had to see the inside of a courtroom. She felt sick thinking about all those adults judging her. The idea of having to prove to anyone that she was telling the truth terrified her. The Bentons believed her though. She hoped that Tom would believe her too.

“He’s a very nice guy.” Nessie nodded.

Nessie fixed a quick lunch of chicken salad sandwiches and chips. She helped Ella choose a nice outfit to wear to Tom’s office. She had sent a copy of the audio file to Tom yesterday after Jetty played it for her.

She knew Tom would have to ask Ella to go on record to discuss some pretty awful things, and she was both glad she would be there for her, but also dreading hearing details about what the girl had gone through. It was something she had up until recently only heard about in news stories, and it always disgusted her how a human being could treat another human being with so little regard, especially a child. The reality check of sitting in the SUV heading to a lawyer's office with a girl who had been badly abused her entire life hit Nessie hard.

# Chapter 14 – On Record

The forty-five-minute drive to Tom's friend's law office in downtown Cincinnati was silent except for the classical music Nessie had on low. Whenever she needed comforting, Nessie played Dvorak's New World

Symphony No. 9. It was like home cooking for your ears. She hoped that her orchestra-loving charge would be comforted as well, and Ella did seem more at ease than when they left the house. Perhaps she was just resigned to what her fate had become. The foreseeable future seemed destined for visits to lawyers, and courtrooms. Ella feared both. Nessie maneuvered through the one-way streets of the city, following her GPS with a little bit of trepidation after it had recently sent her the wrong way down a one-way street in Fairway. She hoped the larger city maps were more accurate. She pulled into the garage under a towering skyscraper, parking as close to an elevator as possible.

“We’re here.” Nessie turned the car off, and turned to Ella.

“Are you ready? We will not go in till you feel ready. We’re a few minutes early anyway.”

“I’m good. I really just want to get it over with. I’m a little scared, to be honest.” She pulled her coat tight as she

got out of the car. “I can’t even imagine, but this should help. Tom will not actually be here today. He’s going to be conferenced in, and they are going to make a legal record of everything you two discuss. It’ll just be me and you in the conference room.”

Ella felt a little better about that. For some reason not having to face the lawyer in person seemed easier. They took the elevator up to the top floor law offices. Nessie explained to the secretary who they were, and that Tom would be conferencing in with them. Their paralegal would be in the room to type out everything that was said in person. Nessie had not realized that this would be the case, and she apologized to Ella who handled it in stride. It had to be done.

“Hello, Nessie!” Tom’s face showed up on the large screen as they took their seats at the end of the conference table opposite the court reporter. He was very handsome, with short, silver hair and kind eyes. He was very well-dressed in a dark blue, pinstriped suit, and

crimson neck-tie around the collar of a crisp-looking white shirt.

“Hi, Ella. I’ll try to be as easy-going as I can. I know this is not going to be easy or comfortable so please forgive me. Some of the questions are going to be ones I am asking because I know the Defense team will be picking away at these topics. The more we get out in the open the better. It’s far better that we face anything potentially harmful to the case out in the open rather than let them dig it up, and look like we were afraid that they would do so. Are you ready?”

Ella looked over at Nessie, and nodded at the screen.

“I am sorry about this, Ella, but from now on you’ll need to vocalize everything. No nodding or hand gestures.” Tom was reviewing a folder in front of him, while putting his glasses on. “Yes. I’m ready to begin.” Ella took a deep breath.

“OK. I’ll start at the beginning then. When you were eight-years-old, did your older brother, Garrett Oliver

Fuson, take money from his friends and teammates in exchange for sexual relations with you?" Tom waited patiently for the question to sink in, and for a response. Nessie bit her bottom lip, and tried not to let out an audible gasp. Ella squirmed in her seat. She knew there was nothing that she did that was wrong, but it didn't mean she was not ashamed, and didn't feel any guilt.

"Yes." She remembered Nessie telling her that she didn't have to elaborate. It was a yes or no question.

"Were the boys who gave your brother money for sexual relations with you under eighteen years of age when the incident occurred?"

"Not all of them." She froze. So much for yes or no questions. "Do you recall any of the names of those boys or men who were over eighteen?"

"Yes." She cleared her throat. It was suddenly getting very dry. She reached for a water bottle that the secretary supplied, and took a long drink.

“Could you please name them for me?” Tom had his pen ready.

“My dad’s best friend Bill Deglow’s nephew, Nat Deglow, and another boy on Garrett’s football team named Ricky. I didn’t know his last name.”

“This next question is going to be very difficult, but I need you to answer as honestly, and as detailed as you can. What acts did each of these men commit on you, and how many times did they do them to the best of your knowledge?”

“I…Ricky was there after almost every home football game…” Ella detailed her abuse to Tom, while Nessie held her hand tightly, and tried her best to comfort the girl. Ella explained what he had done, and how often Ricky had used her for his own amusement. She told how her brother would stand at the stairs to make sure she didn’t run, and their parents didn’t come down. When she got to the point where she mentioned Nat Deglow, she stopped.

“I really don’t want to talk about that time.” She pleaded to the half-person of Tom on the screen. His face fell in sympathy, but he was not relenting.

“I’m sorry, Ella, but we have to ask, and you need to answer because when you hear these sorts of questions again, they will probably be from the opposing law team, and they will not be gentle with you.” Ella took another long drink from her water bottle, and cleared her throat.

“Nat Deglow gave my brother Garrett fifty dollars to have sex with me.” She pulled herself closer to the table so she could rest her arms on it. “I tried to get away. I begged them not to. He threw me on the couch, and pulled my pants down. I remember

my brother telling him not to hurt me too bad because he would get in trouble. He held me down on the couch, and forced me to have sex. I remember it hurt a lot. It was the first time any of them went that far. He turned me over on the couch so that my face was down into the couch. I could hardly breathe. He did it again to me, and

it hurt even worse that time because his full weight was on me, and I felt it tear down there, but he kept forcing me against the couch until I heard Garrett yelling that my parents had come home. The next thing I remember is Garret yelling at me not to tell, and then I passed out. The next day after the school nurse saw me there were nurses, and social services at the hospital." Ella felt like she was having trouble breathing as she spoke. Telling a stranger this, in a huge almost empty conference room with Nessie witnessing it was almost too much to bear. It was mortifying. After a pause to allow her to catch her breath, Tom continued.

"Were you responsible for any of these instances? Were you working with your brother to make money for your service?"

Ella knew he had to ask now, but it still stung. She'd been called a whore, and slut since she was little, and it always stung.

"No," Ella said flatly.

“Did you understand what your brother was doing? Why didn’t you go to your parents? Why didn’t you tell them what was happening if you were not to blame?”

This line of questioning made Nessie angry. She knew this would happen, but she didn’t have to like it. She reached over to hold Ella’s hand once more.

“My brother and his friends thought it was funny to hurt me, and use me, and I had no way to defend myself. I tried to hide in the laundry room, but it was always worse when I did. I got beat up if I hid. Garret wanted to be just like Dad, and do everything Dad did, but if Dad found out he’d get in trouble because it took away from Dad’s profits. They told me they’d kill me if I told Mom or Dad, and they said they’d never believe me or care. They were right too. My mom still doesn’t believe any of it happened, even after the night at the hospital where I had to get stitches because Nat was a full-grown man, and I was just a little girl. My dad’s best friend is Nat’s uncle, Bill Deglow. Bill has groped at me, and slapped me

around as far back as I can remember. You know what he did last week."

"For the record, what did Bill Deglow do to you last week?" Tom sat back. He had a girl only a few years younger than Ella. It strained credulity to believe such monsters as the Deglows and Fusons existed. He didn't usually handle cases such as this. He was used to hearing about bank statements, fraud, copyright infringements, not child abuse. He kept a stoic face, but he was certain he'd have to have a stiff drink, and hugs from his family to get any sleep at all tonight.

"He forced me into the guest bedroom, and held me down, and he raped me. He put all of his weight on me, breaking two of my ribs, and held me by the neck against the bed, cutting off my air. I passed out, and probably would be dead if the cops hadn't come in when they did." Ella cried silently as she spoke in a monotonous voice. It was all business. All her pain and abuse had been nothing but business for her father, and now she

had to recite it like she was reading from a ledger rather than from horrific memories. Suddenly, Ella remembered the photos she had snapped at her house before her father and Bill had come in. The ledger. She pulled her phone out of her jacket pocket, and flipped through the photos.  Nessie could not contain the shocked gasp this time. It broke her heart, and for the first time in her life, she was wishing a person dead; horribly, brutally dead. Ella had not wanted to upset the Bentons anymore than she had to. They were not her parents so the hospital didn't have to tell them all the details. One thing Ella had said was nagging at Nessie. She had said Garret did everything her father did, and mentioned her father's profits. After everything else Nessie had heard, it came as no real shock that her father might have sexually abused Ella, but that's not all it implied.

"Did your father know Bill was attacking you? Did he try to come to your aid at all?" Tom wrote quick notes on his steno pad.  "Yeah. Yes, he knew Bill followed me

upstairs. Our house has walls like paper. You can hear everything in all the rooms. He had to have heard me screaming. He had to have heard the crap Bill was saying." Ella held back. She wasn't telling the whole story about her father, and why Garrett really didn't want their parents to find out. She looked down at the photo of the ledger log. It listed dates, money paid, or owed, and two letter codes that made no sense to Ella. Nessie looked over at the girl who was now paying no attention to Tom or anything else. She wondered what Ella was up to. Was it too much? Was she going to zone out on them? Not that Nessie could blame her.

"Let's go back a moment. What happened to Garrett that night?" Tom tried to regain Ella's attention gently.

"The night Nat Deglow was there, and I got taken to the hospital, cops questioned my brother. Nat had disappeared when they came to the house. I heard later that Garrett gave them Nat's name, but Nat's dad was one of the responding cops. His dad said Garrett was

lying. He threatened him with jail time, and getting kicked off the team. Nat was Mr. Hero, just like my dad had always been. If you're a boy who's good at sports in this town, you're a god. Sometime after the cops left, supposedly Garrett got my dad's gun, and shot himself in the head. I wasn't there so I don't know."

"Are you sure that story is true?"

"How could I be? I heard it from Mike Deglow. He's Bill's son. He was always bragging about his cousin, and his dad. I finally got angry once and told him his cousin was a rapist. He went off on me about how Nat could get away with anything, and I couldn't do anything about it. He's right though. I've never been able to do a thing about any of it. I have no proof other than scars, and my word against theirs."

"There was never any investigation at your home?" Tom looked up, suddenly excited.

"No. Why would there be? It was a big secret. Within a few days, I was back home, Garrett was gone, and there

was no more speaking about it at home unless it was used to pick at me, or show how useless I am." Ella sighed deeply in quiet resignation. What was the use of all this. What good would any of it do?

"So, no one ever went through your home at all?" Again, Tom was making notes quickly.

"No."

"Do your parents still have the same furniture in the basement, or in storage?"

Now Ella was truly confused about these questions.

"Yeah. The den is pretty much a time capsule; the room that gets beat up, and used all the time. It's a wreck of old furniture."

"How about the couch, Ella? Is it the same couch?"

A light bulb went off in Ella's mind, and she was sickened, and excited by the meaning of it all.

“Yeah. Same couch. Same stains. It has a slip cover on it, but it’s the same couch.” Tom nearly fell off his chair, as he looked from Ella to Nessie. Both had caught on to the intent, and wondered the same thing. How likely is it that there might still be evidence on the fabric of that couch from nine years ago? As they watched, Tom reached for his phone, and made a frantic call while holding down the mute button on the video conference controller.

“Do your parents clean often?” Nessie looked over at Ella.

“Not in the den they don’t. The whole reason there’s a slipcover on that nasty couch is because it finally got too nasty for even Dad to deal with. That’s his man cave for him and his friends, and their business.” Ella was nervous. She had no idea how this would play out, but she knew one thing to be true, if her dad or mom caught wind of the importance of that couch before they could get it secured, it would end up as a bonfire in the

backyard. She was certain her dad had already torched the ledger since Bill was arrested. She handed Nessie the phone with the image of the ledger pages. Nessie examined the image carefully, looked over at Ella, and then quickly forwarded the images to Tom.

“Tom, please check your email right now.” Nessie continued to look at the puzzling ledger codes. She had always been good at puzzles, but this was the first one she dreaded solving.

*‘9/13/07 - #49 – 5 mins – BJ w/ RARA1- $100’*

*‘9/13/07 - #2 - ½ hr - AA w/ EF - $500’*

*‘9/14/07 - #13 – ½ hr - AA w/ RARA1 - $250’*

*‘9/14/07 - #2 – 5 mins - BJ w/ EF - $200’*

*‘9/14/07 - #52 – ½ hr – AA w/ RARA2 - $250’*

*‘9/14/07 - #16 – 10mins – Q w/ RARA3 - $100’*

*‘9/21/07 - #49 – 10mins – Q w/RARA1 - $100’*

*‘9/21/07 - #2 - ½ hr - AA w/ EF - $500’*

*‘9/21/07 - #13 – ½ hr - AA w/ RARA2 - $250’*

*‘9/21/07 - #52 – ½ hr - AA w/ RARA3 -$250’*

Tom looked over the ledger carefully, sickened by what he believed he was looking at based on the dates. This was just the first page of the ledger. Ella, being as smart as she is, took a photo of the first page, a middle page, and the last recorded page. The last recorded date being 11/6/16. Just a month ago.

“OK. I’ve got a team on this in your town. I made sure there are no Deglows on the police force anymore before I had them call. Apparently, Nat’s father passed away five years ago from a heart attack shortly after being put on forced leave without pay for assaulting another officer. There’s no love lost for the Deglow family at the police department. You were under the age of fourteen when this happened, and Nat was legally an adult. If we can get evidence from that couch, he’s looking at prison time for rape of a minor. Even if he somehow managed to whittle this down to sexual

battery, the age differences are such that he will definitely do time. He's twenty-seven now, and still lives in Fairway working at the steel mill. It's enough to bring both him, and his uncle back in for questioning. We have a tape of Bill's son, Mike, basically confessing the whole story of his family. It's not admissible as evidence in court, but we could show it to the Defense, and hope they decide to settle out of court for jail time, and damages without ever having to take this to trial. Mr. Fuson is another story. I'm not getting the entire story there. I have one final yes or no question for you." Tom looked into the camera, and hoped he was looking Ella right in the eyes.

"Is your father the head of a prostitution ring that does or has dealt in under-aged girls?"

Ella nodded then looked over at Nessie.

"Yes." Ella felt another knot in her stomach, and her throat hurt. She felt completely overwhelmed once the word was spoken on the matter, having never admitted

it before. She cried quietly. Tom sighed, and wrote more down in his file.

“Honestly, Nessie, I feel we have a strong case for at least a little jail time for the Deglow men. It will not be enough to pay for all that happened, but it’s a start. We need to find the identities of the other girls involved as well. They are also victims. I’d also like you to make a list of the boys who were under eighteen who were involved. They aren’t innocent by any means. Mr. Fuson will be looking at harder consequences. I need to consult with my local team who are more versed in the Ohio prostitution and child abuse laws.” Tom closed his steno pad, and his binder with a loud clapping sound over the intercom.

“OK. I think we’re done for today, Ella. You did really well. I’ve got some legwork to go over with Daniel on the phone, but this was good. I’d like to say the worst is over, but I’m afraid this was just a rehearsal for the worst. After all you’ve been through, I’m not going to

sugar-coat it or lie to you. I'll be straight with you as long as you keep being honest with me. The last thing I want to see is the Defense team hit us with something from left field that I didn't know about. If you think of anything that could be important to the case, you let me know as soon as possible, ok?" Tom looked straight into the video conferencing camera again.

"I will." Ella pushed out away from the desk, and stood. "Thanks, Tom."

"Thank you, my dear." Tom nodded to Nessie as they all stood up. "Good to see you, Nessie. Hopefully, under better circumstances next time."

Ella avoided making eye-contact with the court reporter as they left the conference room. They walked out of the office through glass-paned doors into an open lobby. As they entered an empty elevator, Nessie turned to Ella who had been silently crying.

"May I give you a hug?" Nessie asked, not wanting to upset her after the graphic telling of her history of

abuse. Ella nodded, and Nessie grabbed her up into a gentle hug. "Honey, I am so, so proud of you. You are the bravest kid I have ever met in my life. I know we haven't even had you in our lives long, but I want you to know you have us. All of us. We aren't going anywhere. OK?"

Ella wiped her eyes on her coat sleeve, and nodded once again, still unable to clearly speak without risking a wheezing sob. They got off the elevator on the third floor, and took the stairs out to the parking garage. Once safely inside the large Volvo SUV, Ella took a deep breath, let it out, and broke down in tears. There was no use hiding her sadness from Nessie. Nessie had just heard a confession of the most horrid, personally mortifying experiences of Ella's life. What good would being ashamed of tears do at this point? Nessie wiped the hair out of Ella's face, and handed her a tissue from her purse. She knew Ella was going to be eighteen in a

little over a month, but right now she was just a child in her sight.

“Let’s go find a really amazing coffee house, get the most decadent roast they have, and eat a pastry. I know a place around the corner from here in the theatre district that’s to die for. Deal?”

“Sounds great.” Ella smiled. She could not believe they still wanted to be around her with all the baggage she came with. She toyed with the bracelet Ted had given her as they drove around town until they found the café Nessie spoke of. Ella rubbed her thumb against the edge of her phone case, and took a deep, almost sobbing breath.

“I need to tell you something else though. I’m sorry. I couldn’t say it in front of him, and the lady in the room with us.” She waited till Nessie said something.

“It’s ok. Whenever you’re ready, I’m listening.” Nessie pulled into a parking spot in the lot behind the café.

“I know what all the things on the ledger stand for.” Ella held up her phone with the image of the edger on it, and pointed to the first entry.

“9/13/07 - #49 – 5 mins – BJ w/ RARA1- $100 is the first entry. #49 is the player’s jersey number. ‘5 mins’ is five minutes. I’m sure you can guess what BJ stands for. RARA1,2,3 means it was a cheerleader from the team, and $100 is how much dad charged for her. AA stands for All Access. It meant the guy could do whatever he wanted as long as it didn’t go over the time he paid for, and he didn’t leave a mark. Q stands for quickie.” Ella exited off the screen, and put away her phone.

Nessie already guessed Ella was EF, but she knew Tom would need to hear it on the record. She looked at her own phone. She had forwarded the puzzle to herself as well. She counted the occurrences of EF on just the three random ledger pages, and truly wished she had something to thrash, or kick. The first dates would have been when Ella was just eight years old. The most

recent, just a month ago. This kind, smart young girl had lived her entire life as a slave to her father's sick trade. At that moment, Nessie decided Ella was hers. She was fairly certain her husband would be completely onboard, but honestly, she didn't even care if he wasn't. Ella was her kid now. She would make sure this child never stood alone again.

"Okay. I know coffee, and chocolate don't fix everything, but let's try anyhow." Nessie patted Ella's hand, and got out of the car. Ella was very glad she had dressed up as they walked into the swanky establishment filled with artsy, posh-looking people that Ella considered way too cool for her to be around.

"Vanessa Benton?" And excited woman from across the room screeched, and headed over to them in line. "Are you really Vanessa Benton? I mean, of course you are. That's a stupid question." The woman turned bright red. "I just loved you in Wicked! And Once! Are you in town

for a performance?" She was dressed very stylishly, but was what Emma would've called a hipster.

"I'm just visiting downtown about to enjoy a nice quiet cup of coffee with family." Nessie shook the overjoyed woman's hand, and hoped she took the kind hint. Ella smiled at being referenced as family. She could only dream of having a mother like Nessie. She could not care less that Nessie was famous, although she herself had been a fan, but a person who cared, and watched out for her was so far removed from her point of references as to be mindboggling.

"Oh! Well, I hope you enjoy it. I'm so glad I got to say hi." The woman was gracious, and that impressed Nessie to no end.

"I do not want to be presumptuous, but would you like me to sign anything?" Nessie offered. The woman almost fell over herself, reaching for her purse to find a pen and paper. She settled on her café receipt, and Nessie signed it, 'It was great meeting you! –Vanessa

Benton.' The woman grabbed her coffee, and made a hasty exit.

"That was neat." Ella laughed.

"She was sweet. Sometimes they can be a little possessive. People think because you're famous they somehow own a part of you. I'll be honest though, it's a thrill when you're in an area like this where people appreciate real theatre, and someone tells you they appreciate your craft. Anyone who says otherwise is probably lying." She winked as they gave their orders, and sat back down. Ella was fumbling with her bracelet again when she had a sudden, disturbing thought.

"Nessie? Do you think I need to tell Tom about Ted? Will all of this hurt him if it gets in the papers that he was kissing a girl half a town calls a whore?" Ella was thankful for the nearly empty café's ambient noise, and sound dampening walls. She wouldn't do anything that could hurt Ted or his career.

“First off, Ted is a big boy. He does as he pleases regardless of what the press says about him. Second, ‘half the town’ are a bunch of assholes who are too ignorant to know the difference between rape and a healthy relationship so I put no stock in what half the town says. Thirdly, you cannot control what the public says or does no matter what you try to do. There is simply no use trying. There will always be someone who says a lie, and there will always be someone who believes it. You can’t kill yourself worrying over that. Having said all that, yes, I do believe you should let Tom now that you two are dating just in case.” Ella was relieved. She was also incredibly thrilled to hear Nessie say that she and Ted were dating. It made it way more real to her when she heard another person say it. After their names were called, they picked their cups and pastries up, and walked outside to see the theater across the street.

“Want to go in? I know some people who work there.” Nessie agreed, and they jay-walked across to the Aronoff Theater. It was massive. Ella quickly found out that the people Nessie knew who worked there were actors in the current Broadway show that was in town.

“Normally, they do not allow anyone non-union in here, but since you just had your first onscreen work, I think we can fudge it a little.” Nessie smiled, and guided Ella back through a labyrinth of hallways to a door that said “Employees only” in a very serious font. Nessie knocked, and stood back.

“Hello?” The man who answered the door looked flustered, then a huge smile wove itself across his wrinkled old face.

“Vanessa! So good to see you! C’mere!” The old man grabbed her up into a happy hug which she gladly returned.

“Oh, Charlie, you old fart, you make a girl feel like a baby.” Nessie nudged him, and motioned towards Ella.

“Charlie Michaels, I’d like you to meet a very important young lady. This is Ella, and she is quite possibly the most amazing classical guitarist I have ever had the pleasure to hear in person.” Ella felt the blood rush to her head, not having expected that at all.

“Oh, really? Well, Ella, I am very happy to meet you.” Charlie shook Ella’s hand, and tipped his cap to her. “You two follow me. Come on. Hop to. Keep up with old Charlie.” They walked past a bank of gears, pulleys, and circuit boards, through several layers of curtains until they were standing center stage at the Aronoff next to the ghost light which safely lit the front of the stage. “Whoa.” Ella looked out over all the empty seats in awe. She could not imagine being up on stage when the house was full. How did Nessie manage that?

“Pretty amazing, huh?” Nessie stood there enjoying it all. The current production was the musical “Once” which featured many onstage musicians. The set was at the ready, and a few lonely techies were checking, and

double checking to make certain everything was on its mark.

“Hey, Charlie, can I ask you a favor?” Nessie pulled Charlie off stage, motioning for Ella to continue checking out the stage. A few minutes later, they returned, and Nessie was holding a beautiful classical guitar.

“I know you’re a wee bit shy, but it would be a pleasure to hear you play on this stage, with these acoustics. It’s not got the feel of the old Taft, but it’s pretty awesome. Would you please?” Nessie handed the guitar to Ella, and pulled a stole up for her. Ella was nervous. She sat down, held the neck to her ear, and plucked the strings to check their tunes. The sound was gorgeous, and rich, just like the guitar she had played in the Benton’s basement. “You can do it. Just close your eyes if you get too nervous. It’s just us and a few technicians in here today.”

Ella timidly plucked the strings, and heard the sound resonate out through the theater. It was an

amazing sound. She wanted to hear more of it, more than she was afraid to be heard. The desire to hear the music won out, and Ella launched into one of her favorite pieces by Vincente Gomez. It was a blend of classical and flamenco that made her fingers hop and dance around the fret board and sounding hole. Soon she had forgotten completely that she was sitting center stage, playing her heart out. As she finished the tune, she heard whistling, and a roar of applause from a group that was taking a tour of the theater. They stood at the back, giving Ella a well-deserved first standing ovation.

Ella laughed nervously, and waved a thank you, only to be met with, “Encore! Encore!”

“Well That’s more love than I got on opening night, I’ll tell ya that much!” The melodic male, Irish voice that spoke from behind Ella’s right shoulder nearly startled her off her stole.

“Sorry, love. That was brilliant. Truly.” He gave her a sheepish grin, and extended a hand to shake.

“Ella, this is William Masters. He’s the lead in the musical. He only wishes he played like that.” Nessie teased, and tussled the man’s hair. He looked like he could be in his late twenties, but Ella was not certain.

“Hey, Auntie! Not cool. Family or no.” He smiled even as he faked irritation.

“You two are related?” Ella was surprised.

“My older brother lives in Ireland. This rapscallion is his oldest son, and my nephew. Ella’s been staying with us. She and Jetty are friends.”

“Well Jetty has decent taste after all.” William winked, and Nessie shot him a warning glare that amused Ella.

“We’ve had a rough morning, so I decided a few friendly faces would do us good.” Nessie hugged her nephew, then helped Ella off the high stole as her ribs were still causing her a great deal of pain after sitting for so long. William noticed, and gave Nessie a questioning glance.

“You alright, love?” William reached over to assist them.

“She’s fine. Just a rough day. We’d better be off. Thank you both for allowing us to traipse across sacred ground. You’re coming to dinner this weekend, right William? Bring whoever you’d like along.”

Nessie thanked her nephew, and Charlie, and ushered Ella quickly off stage, down the hall, through the cavernous lobby, and out into the city. She didn’t think Ella needed an exposition about her recent injuries right then, after the time they had spent that afternoon at the law office.

“What say we head home for some rest? I think you earned it. Daniel will be gone for the week, so I’ll order Chinese tonight, and take the night off. Sound good?” Nessie yawned as she spoke. Ella thought that sounded excellent. What a roller coaster her world had become. From the depths of despair at the law office, to playing classical guitar on the stage of the Aronoff; Life had become very, very bizarre.

# Chapter 15 - Disgust

Jetty hated going to classes knowing that Ella was home dealing with lawyers, and depositions. It all seemed kind of pointless. She was glad she had been able to record stupid Mike's rant yesterday, but today

she was hoping to avoid him. That family was not stable in any stretch of the imagination, and she worried what Mike might try something stupid if he found out she had told her parents about what he had said. The people at school were aggravating Jetty as well. They treated her like a queen simply because of who her parents were. Ella was smart, pretty, and had lived here her entire life, yet everyone treated her like dirt, and wouldn't even give her a chance. Nothing but rumors and bad jokes were spoken about the girl. That was not entirely true. The lower classmen in band actually seemed to like Ella. She stood up for them at band camps, and in the halls. No younger kids ever got picked on if Ella could help it. A few of the Drama techs liked her as well. She was good at working the lights, and could paint scenery better than any of them. If push came to shove, no one had her back, but one on one, there were some who actually liked Ella Fuson, and knew she was not the person the jocks, and even some of the teachers claimed she was.

As she entered the darkened little make-shift practice theater which was made up of two classrooms joined together, Jetty heard an argument underway, and stayed back behind the backstage props room doors out of sight.

“You can’t be serious! You’re just doing this to get more attention!” a shrill girl’s voice squawked in anger.

“I am not. Fuson was not the only girl Sweeny fucked. If I go forward, he goes to jail for real, not just probation. He told the lawyers he wrote me love letters, and that I had a fling with him. That’s so gross! I was dating Jeremy then. He thinks I cheated on him now. I’m not losing my prom date over some old asshole who can’t keep his penis in his pants!”

“But he didn’t rape you. He probably just felt you up and stuff. That’s all he did to me.”

“Molly, he pushed my skirt up, and fucked me while I said he should quit until he gets it all the way up. I’m pretty sure that’s still considered rape.” The girl’s

nonchalant attitude amazed Jetty. She sounded for all the world like this was some exciting adventure.

“Geez. That’s disgusting. You act like you liked it. Seriously, Carrie, quit smiling about it. That’s sick. I stick to the team clients. I won’t do oldies.”

“Well, I don’t do anything for free, and I don’t owe Boss anything this week. Sweeny took what wasn’t for sale. Well, my folks are going to sue, and I’m going to say rape. My mom told me this morning that it’s rape, no matter what since I’m sixteen, and he’s old. She told me my college might get paid for out of this.”

Again, the girl’s voice sounded almost gleeful. It made Jetty furious. She seriously hoped no college was foolish enough to accept such an awful excuse for a human being. After several more minutes of useless banter, more people entered the room, and Jetty felt safe to enter along with the others. Today were try-outs for the next play. It was going to be Neil Simon’s “Rumors.” Jetty hoped to audition for the part of Chris Gorman or Claire

Ganz, the leading female roles in the play. She enjoyed plays that required a good sense of comedic timing. If the timing was off in a Neil Simon play, the jokes fell flat. Jetty took a seat in the back, after grabbing a copy of the play to peruse. She had read it before, and seen her mom perform it for a charity event. She started running the lines in her head alone in the back room, when a tall person all in black sat next to her, and opened their own copy up. Nessie was about to get miffed that out of all the empty seats they had to sit by her until she looked up and recognized the girl she had been admiring in chemistry class since the first day she came to this school. She was a quiet type who almost always wore dark shades or red, black or blue, and her hair was died black, while her gray eyes made Jetty think she was probably a blonde. She wore a thick paracord bracelet with a US army dog tag woven into it on one wrist, and a thick, black leather watchband on the other. Her black jeans were rolled up loosely over a pair of high-top Doc

Martens, and her dark navy blue t-shirt had a few tears on the sleeves that didn't look purposely created. To Jetty she looked like she ought to be a drummer. She guessed she rode a skateboard to school. To her great humiliation she looked up at her face to meet her eyes. Busted. There was no way for her to tell how long she'd been watching her watching her. She decided to play it cool.

"Hi. I'm jetty." She extended a hand, and she grasped it in return.

"Jane. We have a few classes together. Who are you trying out for? I'm going for Chris Gorman." She scooted her chair a bit closer almost without notice.

"Chris Gorman." Jetty blushed. She would not mind being her understudy for a while. Jane's eyes seemed to bore holes into her skull. It was as unnerving as it was flattering.

“Break a leg.” She patted Jetty’s back with her book as she was called up to the front to read, causing Jetty to giggle in a way she had not done since she was little.

After the try-outs, Jane caught up with Jetty as she walked down the hall to get her locker, and head home for the day.

“Hey, Jetty?” She walked up beside her, and leaned against the bank of lockers. “You wanna catch a burger sometime after school at the jug?” She ran a hand through her thick, wavy black hair. “Yeah. That sounds like fun.” Jetty slid her books into her backpack, closed her lock, and spun the dial to lock it.

“Cool. Maybe this Friday?”

“Sounds good. I’ll have to check with my folks, but yeah.”

Jane grinned, and handed her a card with her phone number and email address. It was a business card for her custom skateboard deck paintings. Jetty thought it was

awesome that she had her own business cards, and that she was an artist.

“See ya tomorrow.” Jane walked on down the hall, leaving Jetty to stand there and catch her breath. She could not wait to get home, and talk to Ella about Jane. She really hoped she wouldn’t find out she was some kind of psychopath or something terrible like that. She also was eager to hear how today had gone for Ella at the law offices downtown in Cincinnati. She knew it could not have been easy.

Jetty rushed out to her car in the cold weather, and quickly started the engine. She was grateful that she did not have to wait for Henry or Emma this time. Those two had finally taken up with another driver, which freed Jetty to race home to dish and be dished. She stopped at a small coffee shop, and got coffees for herself, Ella, and her mom who she knew would probably be home rehearsing her musical again tonight. While she was very excited and happy for her mother for getting the lead

female role in the production, she dreaded the inevitable time that it would take her away from Jetty and Daniel. She guessed they would be moving to upstate New York again for the run of the play, and if it did well, which it would, then it would be on Broadway for who knew how long. She wondered how much time Nessie would agree to commit to this role. Nessie usually recorded the soundtracks for these first runs, then would sign up for a season or two to launch the production then leave the role to the next actress once it was established. Selfishly, Jetty hoped it would not be very long, but anyhow, Jetty was going to be going off to college soon. She had already visited quite a few, and been accepted into several. None of the ones she liked were in New York, however. She considered Northwestern in Chicago as her first pick, and had already been accepted. It suddenly hit Jetty that she didn't know what Ella's plans were for after graduation. Yet another thing she needed to discuss with her.  Jetty ran upstairs to Ella's room,

tossing her backpack haphazardly into her own room as she passed, and flopped down on Ella's bed next to her.

"So? How did it go?" Jetty handed Ella her coffee in a neat, new plastic travel mug. She was always a sucker for the cool, refillable containers for coffee. "

Mmmm. Thanks." Ella took a careful sip of the hot coffee, and set the mug down on her night stand. "It was rough. I had to tell Tom, in detail, things that happened to me, who all had done things to me, and your mom and a court reporter were in the room the entire time. It was really terrifying, but it felt good to get it over with. After we left there, though, we stopped for coffee then walked over to the Aronoff, and I got to play guitar on the stage. That was terrifying too, but it sounded so nice in that place. Once I started playing, I wasn't so scared. Your cousin William was there. He was funny. He'll be coming over this weekend apparently. Do you two get along?" Ella stopped to take another sip of coffee.

“Whoa. Weird day.” Jetty smirked. “I’m sorry the testimony was so harsh, but playing on the Aronoff stage sounds awesome! My cousin? Meh. He’s ok. He’s a few years older than me, and we used to fight a lot as kids, but we get along fine now so long as he behaves. He used to pull pranks all the time, and say it was the leprechauns because when I was little, I used to say he was a leprechaun because he was Irish and small. So yeah. I was a

racist little kid apparently. He’d do stuff like swap out sugar in the salt shakers, and put cellophane on the toilet seat. That one got him in big trouble with Mom. Speaking of Mom, she is down in her studio practicing, and Dad is out for the week. I’m glad you’re here, or I’d be bored out of my mind.” Jetty drank her coffee, and lay on her stomach on the bed so that her legs hung over on one side, and her head and arms draped over the other. It was strangely comfortable.

“OH! Oh, my gosh! I totally almost forgot to tell you what happened to me today at drama try-outs!” Jetty slid off the bed, and turned to face Ella while sitting on the floor wiping the drops of coffee she had just spilled off of her shirt.

“Do you know a girl named Jane who’s a tall, hot skater girl? She’s in my advanced Chem 2 class.”

Ella stopped drinking her coffee, and just stared at Jetty for a moment of fake shock.

“Oh, no. She’s a puppy-kicking psycho, isn’t she? Darn it.” Jetty was truly dejected, so Ella figured she had better let her off the hook quickly.

“No. I’m just teasing. Jane Kelly is actually one of the very few people around who has never once picked on me, made fun of me, or laughed when others did. She actually stood up for me once in the fifth grade. She’s never kicked any puppies that I know of. She’s nice. Very artsy and cool.”

Jetty was relieved, and more excited now.

“She asked me out on a date this Friday.” Jetty was excited. “She was there trying out for a part also, and sat down next to me to talk about what role I was auditioning for. She’s really cute.”

Ella was happy for Jetty. She wished Ted was in town so they could double date like actual, normal teenagers. That was something neither of the girls had really ever been able to be. Ella listened as Jetty planned out her outfit and attitude for their date. “She’s taking me to someplace called the Jug. Sounds like a bar.” Jetty looked to Ella for clarification.

“That is probably the best hamburgers, and waffle fries in town. That is the place for awesome first dates. It’s a landmark.” “So…where is the place for second dates?” Jetty waggled her eyebrows.

“Ha! You’re hopeful.” Ella laughed. “That would be the drive-in theater. It’s open year-round, and the sound for the movie comes through your stereo speakers so it’s

really private, and romantic." "Wow, you guys really go for the whole throwback dating around here, huh? I didn't know there were still any drive-ins in existence. Shoot, we ought to go, even without the dates. Mom would love that. She never gets to see movies because people recognize her. Not as often around here, but still. She would rather be able to just watch the movie in peace. Too bad Ted isn't in town. We could double date. Although, I'm not sure I'd want to be in the same car as you guys on a date. Ick." Jetty made a revolted face.

"I also heard some bad stuff before everybody started coming in to the drama room. A couple of younger girls, Carrie and Molly, were talking about what Mr. Sweeny had done to them. Molly was claiming he raped her, but at the same time, she was laughing about it, and saying her parents were going to sue and get lots of money over it. Geez, am I the only girl he didn't diddle?" Ella wasn't shocked by this revelation.

“That doesn’t really surprise me about those two. Carrie dated Mike for a while. I’m afraid she has pretty low expectations where guys are concerned. I guess he can tell the ones he can get away with messing with. Molly is a different story. She’s one of Dad’s newest RaRa girls” Ella shook her head sadly.

“I have no idea what that means.” Jetty shook her head, confused. Ella asked Jetty to hand her phone to her, and she pulled up the ledger image once more.

“This is a page from my dad’s business ledger. I’m not talking about his work at the steel mill.” Ella explained the shorthand terms to Jetty who was disgusted, and amazed at the number of girls the slime-bag had been able to con into this arrangement over the years.

“Molly is RARA3 in the most recent ledger page. Dad gets paid cash for her time, and she gets her car payment taken care of each month. Her folks think she’s a math tutor on Friday nights.” Ella almost laughed.

“So that one there?” Jetty pointed to an entry from last month: *11/09/15 - #24 – ½ hr – AA w/ EF -$100*.

Her sick dad had bargain-binned his own kid.

“That was just a week before we met you.” Jetty scooted closer to Ella, unable to believe these terrible things had been happening to her friend for so long. They were both exhausted, and fell fast asleep on top of Ella’s huge bed.

# Chapter 16 – For Keeps

Tom turned on his large tablet computer, and tapped on the flashing email icon with his stylus. Since his meeting with Vanessa and Ella the previous day, he had feelers out all around the Miami Valley area of Ohio. There was no way so many members of the same football team could have been involved in anything like this, and none of the coaches or adults knew about it.

Someone would have talked, or bragged, or told on someone else. He opened an email from one of the people he had checking into old files, and read the entire email several times before contacting Daniel.

*“Mr. Danvers, Looking into the records of dates and occurrences, I decided to investigate the coaching staff as well at the time. The name that stood out like a neon sign was the Varsity Assistant coach; a Mr. Walter Sweeny. I double checked, and he is the very same Mr. Sweeny that is currently accused of molesting many of his students, including your client, Miss Ella Fuson. Ella and Garrett’s father, Nathan Fuson was part of the coaching staff as well. He ran the line markers during the football games, and went out drinking with them after every game. What really has my team digging for gold are the girls who were cheerleaders during this earlier period. They’re all grown women now, of course, and one was recently arrested in a prostitution sting in Downtown Fairway. In her deposition, she claimed that she had*

*been a prostitute since she was in high school. She claims that the football team would pay her for favors, and some of the teachers, and fathers did as well. I will not make you guess who was on that*

*list. Mr. Sweeny, as well as Nathan Fuson, were named as grown men who paid her and other girls for sexual favors while they were part of the football team crew. She said that the captain of the football team, a Nat Deglow, and Nathan Fuson were the ring leaders. They would figure out how much to charge for different activities, would hook guys up with girls, and would split the money. Fuson allowed them to use his basement if they didn't have anywhere to meet up. We will continue to hunt down facts, and build a case. At the very least, Ella Fuson should easily be able to file a motion to become an emancipated minor as soon as possible, and the Bentons can move to become her legal guardians until she turns eighteen, and is declared an adult by the state of Ohio."*

Tom picked up his phone, and dialed Daniel.

“Daniel? I think this has become a very big case, very fast. I need advice on how you want to move forward on this because, from what I have just read, this case will be on the National news by end of week. Are you sure you want to continue being involved in the life of Ella Fuson? She’s a great kid, there’s no denying that, but this is going to get messy, very public, and your name is going to be in the papers a lot. Once the mud-slinging begins, you are likely to even accidentally be accused of being one of the johns. So, old friend, even though I think I know the answer to this question, I have to ask you. Are you prepared to become the legal guardian of Ella, and are you prepared to stand by her in court through a potentially very messy battle involving child importuning, and rape?” Tom waited as he heard Daniel take a deep breath on the other end of the line.

“Where do I sign?” Daniel smiled even as he was a bit uneasy about what the paparazzi and Hollywood

reporters would do. He and his wife usually fared well in the public eye, as neither of them did anything foolish in public. While this would never qualify as foolish in his eyes, he realized it would be a very juicy story for the news. Famous Hollywood family takes in damaged young woman, defending her in court. He cringed as he thought of what Ella might be made out as in the papers. He wanted to protect her from that as much as possible. Perhaps he'd best speak to his agent about a press release as the court dates arrive to preempt any attacks on the girl's character. He also realized he hadn't even discussed things with Nessie before telling Tom to draw up papers to help move Ella permanently into their lives. They had only known this child for a week. It was a ridiculous thing to do when he thought about it logically. However, if he thought about it at all, it was the only thing his conscience and heart was telling him to do. The two combined had never steered him wrong. It was part of what made him such a successful writer and director.

He was able to discern what was worth fighting for, and which battles he could win. He decided he had best give Nessie a heads-up though, as Tom would be sending paperwork to Ella within a few days, and Daniel would not be back in town until the following week. Nessie's phone beeped through over her practice headset. The only person who had that number, and who would dare to call when she was practicing was Daniel.

"It better be good, Dannyboy. I was in the middle of the showstopper." Nessie took a swig from her water bottle, and waited for Daniel's reply.

"It is pretty important actually. Tom found out some pretty significant things about Ella's family, Mr. Sweeny, and a hoard of others are now involved in the prostitution ring case." He waited to see if Nessie would respond. "He's sending her papers to file for emancipated minor status."

Again, he waited to hear a response.

“He’s sending us papers to become her legal guardians until she turns eighteen.”

Nessie took a deep breath, and another drink of water.

“I suppose you already said sign us up?”

Daniel could hear the smile in Nessie’s voice.

“You know I’m on board, Daniel. Now. Can I get back to rehearsal so I can get the feelings out or do you want me to burst into tears on the phone?” Nessie knew well that Daniel Benton could not stand seeing or hearing anyone cry.

“Love you, Ness.” Daniel hung up the phone and grinned. Now they needed to discuss it with Ella herself.

After she had finished rehearsing for the day, Nessie walked upstairs to look for the girls. She could hear them laughing in Jetty’s room. It was nice to hear laughter. Jetty was often so solemn, and stayed more to herself since they had moved to LA a few years back. Nessie had mixed feelings

about sending her to a local public school, but felt guilty and stuck-up for feeling that way. Both she and Daniel had been brought up in public school, and they didn't turn out so bad. Still, Jetty was far ahead of most of the other students at the school except for a few including Ella who was in all Advanced Placement classes. She was so thankful Jetty and Ella had met for so many reasons. She hated to think what would have already become of the girl if Jetty had not seen fit to befriend her, and realized she had found a kindred spirit in the girl with the black eye. Nessie yelled up to the girls to come down for dinner plans. They raced down the stairs, and plopped on the couch in front of the TV.

"I have a few things to discuss with you two. They are rather huge actually." Nessie sat down on a large wing-back chair that faced the couch.

"Uh, oh. That sounds ominous." Jetty teased.

“It’s about you, Ella. Tom is going to be sending you paperwork so that you can officially become an emancipated minor. Do you know what that means?”

“Yes.” Ella looked from Nessie to Jetty. She had known she could do such a thing, but when it had just been her, she never dared. “Tom is absolutely positive there will be no contesting it. There is far too much evidence to back up your case. Also, and this is something that is completely up to you, though we really would love it.” She looked at Jetty who suddenly got excited knowing where this was going. “We would like your permission to file to become your legal guardians until you turn eighteen. I know it’s just a few months, but you will still need shelter, support, benefits…you deserve to have that with a family, and we’d be honored to have you be a part of ours.”

Ella was floored. She simply shook her head yes, and smiled. Nessie and Jetty both attacked her with hugs causing Ella to gasp in pain, while also laughing. Jetty and

Nessie both recoiled in fear as they realized what they had done, but Ella pulled them back in to another, albeit gentler hug.

“So why don’t we order some food, and celebrate the good news?” Nessie walked out to the kitchen to do just that as Jetty hopped up and down on the couch like a hyper Chihuahua. “Awesome!” Jetty simply could not contain her excitement. She wondered what exactly the whole process entailed. Did it mean her family was adopting Ella, or just becoming legally responsible for her?

“Does this mean we’re sisters, or just roommates?” Ella questioned while wiping away tears, and attending to her tender, sore sides.

“I’m not sure. Either way, though, you get to stay here, and don’t ever have to go back to your house. Are you OK with that? Are you going to miss it at all?” Jetty knew she would miss anyplace she had lived all of her life, but

maybe not if all of her life she had been treated like a slave.

“I won’t miss it even for a second. I never want to set foot in that house again.”

# Chapter 17 – Thread Bare

A loud knocking awoke Nathan from his sleep. It was ten in the morning, but he worked second shift so it was way too early for him to be getting disturbed. After more insistent knocking, Stella opened the door to try to tell whoever it was to go away, when a warrant to search the premises was thrust into her face. “Ma’am, I’m going to have to ask you and anyone else in the home to please step outside. We have a warrant to search the entire house for evidence in an ongoing case.” The officer stood back between two other officers to allow Stella to come outside. “Wait. I need to wake my husband. He works the night shift at the factory.” She

hurried in, shaking Nathan awake. “Get up! What did you do? There are cops outside, and they say we have to leave.”

Nathan sat bolt upright, immediately awake, and threw on his robe. He stormed towards his front door prepared for a fight, but thought better after seeing the fully armed group of officers, and the warrant.

“Please step outside, sir. If you’d like, you can wait in the cruiser until we’re done with our search.” Officer Linda Brandt stood in front of the trio with her hand resting on her holster to show that this was no mild suggestion. They meant business. The Fusons relented, and stood in their pajamas and winter coats in their driveway as neighbors peaked curiously through blinds and curtains. Stella was humiliated.

As Nathan and Stella Fuson looked on with a mix of fear and hate, officers swept through their home for evidence. Officer Brandt walked a crime scene technician to the basement.

“I was told to tell you to check the couch specifically. It should have a slip cover on, but it’s the original couch.”

“Thanks.” The tech gave a look of disgust, having read the report on this case. He walked directly over to the old three-person couch, and took photos from all angles, before lightly spritzing luminol over the cover, and shining a UV light on it. There didn’t seem to be any traces of blood on the cover or body fluids. He yanked the slip cover off, and once more took photos of the dilapidated couch underneath. The old fabric was grungy and smelled. He turned out the lights, and held up the UV light. It was like light show. Practically the entire surface of the couch glowed in the ultraviolet light. He looked towards the large exterior basement door. This whole couch would have to go back to the lab. He looked around for more old furniture, but found none that had cloth. He spritzed the walls lightly with luminol, and turned out the lights. A gasp left his lips, as she saw the distinct tell-tale sign of blood splatter on the wall next to

the door. It was up high, and projected straight at the wall, then seeped down. He had seen this before. He flipped through his files to find the report on the son, Garret Fuson's reported suicide. He stared at the wall. There was no way this kid could have shot himself in the head, and created this kind of spatter. It was not a close-range shot, and there was no bullet hole in the wall. It said in the report that the bullet lodged in the back of his skull. There was no way this kid fired a gun into his own head, and it just sat there. He looked to see who had filed the report, Lt. Deglow. The lab tech knew that name for some reason. He made a note, and called for the other techs to come join him.

"Hey, Roger? What do you see here?" He sprayed a fresh coat of luminol, and flipped off the lights.

"Looks like gunshot spatter. Probably shooter was about," He paced back to the edge of the stairs, "Yeah. Had to have been at least this far away. Is there a record of a murder victim in the home?"

“Nope. A suicide. You tell me if this could have been a suicide?” Matt looked at his colleague, knowing the answer.

“No way in hell. Good find. Write it up.” Roger radioed up to the officers.

“I think we need to take the folks in for questioning. This just became a murder investigation. No statute of limitations on that.” Upstairs, Officer Brandt gave a weary look to her fellow officers, and pulled out her handcuffs.

“Mr. and Mrs. Nathan and Stella Fuson, you have the right to remain silent…” As she read them their rights, they were cuffed and led away to the police cruiser as the crime scene technicians continued their work long into the day. By mid-day, word had spread quickly around the town about the arrests, and the suspected finds. Many young men and old alike were very nervous about what would transpire next. Officer Brandt started to realize that this was the sort of case that would make

or break her career. She had a girl of her own that had just entered middle school, and was not eager for her to start hearing this case on the news on a daily basis.

# Chapter 18 - Garrett

The next morning, Jetty and Ella were at breakfast, ready to make Ella's return back at school. They were both a bit nervous after the threats Mike Deglow had

made. Jetty hadn't told Ella about them. Now she seemed to realize she probably should have.

"So, what is up with Mike Deglow? Is he dangerous, because he talked some serious crazy stuff this week? He said he was going to try to get you when you came back to classes." Ella didn't seem fazed at all by this.

"Oh, he's all talk. He has threatened me all my life. He wants to be his cousin so badly, but he's terrified of getting into any real trouble. He once threatened me with a plastic butter knife, and I reached over and broke it in half." Ella laughed. She knew Mike could probably be dangerous given a chance, but she honestly didn't think he was stupid enough to try anything at school.

Jetty was relieved. She had zero love for the Deglow family in this town. They drank their coffees, finished their toast, and said goodbye to Nessie as they ran out the door. Nessie had rented a Honda for them to drive for the time being since the car Ella had been driving was owned by her parents, and they had

demanded it back. Ella was thrilled to be allowed to drive the much newer, nicer smelling vehicle that didn't have a rear left tire that wobbled like it was falling off. She was equally thrilled to no longer have to pick up Emma and Henry. She couldn't believe how much more relaxing trips to school had become. Even though she knew it was the same old place, she would still be picked on now even more with so many townies affected by the case, she still was looking forward to getting back to class since she had the Bentons on her side. As they pulled in, parked, and headed into the school, Ella felt stronger, and more confident than she had before. Her ribs were wrapped, her eye was healing, and she had a family standing by her that actually cared. She had a boyfriend too. Ted had been texting her every day. She wasn't allowed to talk about anything involving the case in texts or emails, but she could tell him about giving her deposition, and playing guitar at the Aronoff. He promised to send her a souvenir from Canada. Ella wore

her bracelet every day as well. It was her talisman of strength. She printed out the photo of the two of them, and taped a copy in her locker, as she dropped her books off that morning. Jetty smiled appreciatively. No one around would even recognize Ted as a movie star. In the photo he just looked like a normal teenager out on a date. Without his hair spiked up, and his collar popped in a ridiculous fashion that they always seemed to photograph him in, he didn't even look like the Ted from the movies, and that made Ella very happy. She liked that the photo depicted Ted the way she knew him. Ted had surprised her by saying he would be able to fly in with Daniel for her birthday in March. She couldn't wait.

As she closed her locker, and turned, Mike towered over her.

"You came back? You actually think you can show your face around here? You had your own folks arrested, my dad arrested, Mr. Sweeny. Who's next? You are done,

Ella." Mike pulled a large bowie knife from his jacket, and held it to her stomach.

"Either you tell everyone you lied about it all, and you're a low-life whore, or I shove this right up your ass. You'd probably enjoy it." Mike snarled. Ella pressed herself flat against her locker.

"Stop right there! Drop it right now, Mr. Deglow. Now!" Mr. Whipple stood beside them moving his arm between the knife and Ella. Mike dropped the knife, and Mr. Whipple immediately threw him against the lockers, and pulled his arms behind his back. Another teacher picked the knife up with a tissue like it was a hot potato, and followed Whipple who was dragging Mike towards the office. Jetty was there right away.

"Are you ok? Do we need to go?" Jetty put an arm on Ella's shoulder, more to steady herself from shaking than Ella.

"No. I'm not leaving. I'm back, and I didn't do anything wrong. They aren't chasing me out of school my senior

year.” Ella stood firm as the bell rang for homeroom. They hurried into Mrs. Williams’s room, who looked worriedly at the two. She nodded to them both as they took their seats.

When they got to drama class, there was a crowd gathered around a sheet of paper on the wall. The play! Jetty had almost completely forgotten in all the excitement that they were posting the roles for the school winter play today. She squeezed through, and saw to her glee that she had been cast as Claire Ganz. Jane was cast as Chris Gorman. It would make it necessary for them to be around each other a lot for the next few months. She smiled, as she heard a voice over her shoulder, practically whispering in her ear.

“I think the Ganz girl and that Gorman chick might hook up.” Jane’s voice gave her a shiver as her warm breath hit her ear. She turned around to face her with a broad smile to match her own. “You think so huh? I don’t believe that’s in the script.” Jetty teased, as she raised

her eyebrows and smiled a goofy grin to Ella who was walking up to them.

“Hey, Ell. How are you doing?” Jane helped her off with her backpack, and the trio took seats in the back of the drama class. “Better, thanks. I’m going to be running the sound board for you guys again, and hopefully helping with the set design.” Ella loved being a techie. It was perfect. She got to see all the plays and musicals, contribute to them, and avoid ever being seen which worked for her.

“Cool! Your sets are always great. Now that we’re seniors, you can make the younger guys do all your work.” Jane grinned, and slyly slid her hand onto Jetty’s hand beside her. Jetty made no motion to move, enjoying the contact. Mrs. Williams handed out scripts to all those chosen to be involved with the play. Ella looked at her script, and saw in large font “Stage Manager.” She looked up, surprised at Mrs. Williams who smiled warmly. She’d never been the stage manager. She’d be

responsible for making sure all the props were on their mark, doors opened properly, all the workings of the set, and stage. At first, she was disappointed she wouldn't be running the sound or lights, but she realized this meant she would be backstage with her friends more instead of stuck alone up in the sound booth. She wasn't used to having friends to hang out with.

Class seemed to race by. As they left, Jane took Jetty's hand, and spoke.

"I won't be in class tomorrow. Lame dentist appointment. See you tomorrow night? Can I pick you up around five?"

"Yeah. That sounds great." Jetty smiled.

"It's a date." Jane gave her hand a quick squeeze then hopped on her board, and headed home. She lived in the relatively high-end neighborhood behind the school. Ella nudged Jetty's arm as they walked to the car.

"We've got dates." Ella stated it in mock shock.

“We’ve got awesome, hot, nice dates.” Jetty corrected her. As they buckled their seatbelts, Jetty remembered something she had let purposely slip her mind in order to be able to enjoy the rest of her day.

“Mike said they arrested my parents. Why would they arrest my parents? I mean, yeah, Dad is an asshole, and was part of the whole prostitution thing, but wouldn’t they just wait for a trial?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Mom knows.”

They drove home in silence as Ella tried to think of what could have happened. When they got home, Jetty opened the door, and right away yelled for her mom.

“Mom? Are you home?”

“I’m in the study.” Nessie called out. Ella had never been in the study. She had looked into it, but had never entered. It was a huge portion of the first floor, and the walls were lined with built-in bookshelves. It was like a private library, and a huge black grand piano sat in the

corner in front of a bank of windows that looked out into the garden.

“Hey, Mom? We heard at school today that the Fusons had been arrested. Did you hear anything about that?” Jetty and Ella each sat in one of the huge leather chairs across from Nessie’s settee. Nessie looked up from her book over her reading glasses. She was not looking forward to this conversation at all.

“Yes. Tom called me today. Ella, this is pretty hard stuff to hear. I know you’ve heard a lot, and been through a lot, but this is harsh, and I’m so sorry.” Now Ella was concerned. What else could be wrong? Had she not already been through it all?

“They had enough evidence based on the testimony of a former cheerleader, to open a case up revolving around the prostitution ring that went on with many of the ball players and cheerleaders, and sadly you. When they heard that your parents hadn’t gotten rid of the old couch that had been down there for years, they got a

search warrant for the entire home in hopes of finding evidence that may still be intact. While the guys were down there checking things out, they found something that makes them think Garrett didn't commit suicide." Nessie looked at Ella to see if she could gage her reaction. Ella was hard to read at times such as this.

"I never thought he was capable of killing himself. I always said there was no way, but my dad would hit me if I said a word, and say it was my fault. Garrett was a coward. He may have been a big, tough football player, but he couldn't handle pain. He'd still cry when he had to get shots. He hated the site of blood. I never thought he killed himself." Ella leaned forward in her chair. "Did Dad do it?" Ella didn't even sound surprised.

Nessie was a bit taken aback by this.

"I…don't know. Do you really think your father could have shot Garrett?"

"I think it's possible. I wasn't there that night. They had taken me away, but I know Garrett had been yelling at

my dad that it wasn't his fault as they were picking me up off the couch before I passed out." Ella shook her head, uncertain exactly of what all she had heard that night. Parts were a blur, but she knew her brother was scared, and her dad was furious. She knew he wasn't mad about what had been done to her. He was mad that they would have to get her help, and he would lose revenue.

Suddenly, Ella stared off into the distance, feeling like she was in that room long ago. She felt frozen in place, as she felt cold hands grabbing her around the waist, and lifting her off the blood-stained couch. She could smell the revolting scent of her father's cologne, and hear him shouting at her brother.

"You fucking idiot! You've ruin it all. We've got to take her to the emergency room. What the hell? You're the one that's taking the blame for this, kid. I told you to give him a fucking cheerleader. She's too small for him. You never listen."

“He wanted Ella. He wanted her. He paid me fifty bucks!” Garrett was pleading with their father. “It wasn’t my fault dad! You told me to hook the guys up with whoever they wanted.”

“For groping and messing around with. Not for a fuck. That’s what the cheerleaders are for. Damnit! They’re going to know what happened to her. I told you to never leave any marks. Your fucking idiot friend split her open!” Ella’s father roared at Garrett. He couldn’t care less for the child in his arms. She was a thing he loaned out, and she was now broken.

Ella shook in fear, she cried, and was still staring off in the distance. Nessie quickly got up, and put her arms around the girl, and gently rocked her to try to bring her back to the present. She had seen someone have flashbacks before, but that had been a war veteran. She also had been reading up on how to care for people who had been severely abused, and she was thankful she had at least some knowledge of how to help the girl.

“Ella? Come on, Sweetie. We’re right here. Jetty and Nessie. Come on back to us, kiddo.” She held her as tightly as she dared as Ella’s body was racked with sobs.

“Is she ok?” Jetty was scared. Ella still wasn’t saying anything. She’d been fine moments before, and then it was like she went blank.

“She’ll be fine. We just need to comfort her, and let her know she’s safe. Right, Sweetheart? You’re here with us now. No one is here that would hurt you.” She rocked Ella a few more minutes until she could finally feel her body become less tense, and the sobbing slowed down to a sniffle here and there.

“I’m so sorry.” Ella felt her cheeks burning with shame. She was completely embarrassed. She hated losing control, and for a brief time it felt like she was back nearly nine years ago when it all happened.

“Oh, Honey, you have nothing to be sorry for. Nothing at all.”

“I remembered what Dad yelled at Garrett. I thought it was all Garrett’s idea. It was my Dad. My dad was making him do it.” Ella was still crying. She felt seething hate for the man that should have been a father to her instead of an abusive pimp.

“Your dad was having your brother charge money for you?” Jetty got a harsh look from Nessie, but she simply could not wrap her mind around that.

“He was screaming at Garrett for messing it all up. That was the last time I saw Garrett alive. My dad must’ve shot him after Mom took me to the hospital.”

“Well, we’ll wait to hear from Tom before we say anymore. I think it sounds like the evidence is backing up your memories of that night though. How about we go have some hot cocoa in the kitchen?” Nessie steered the girls out of the study. She needed to discuss important things with them, but first, she needed to help them relax after this dramatic episode. Nessie realized now that no one had ever gotten any help or support for Ella.

She decided she would find the best therapist she could locate for her. She had a friend who had written a book, and filmed an entire documentary on the subject. Nessie wondered if she had been having flashbacks for long, or just since she'd been away from the old house. She didn't think tonight would be an appropriate time to broach the subject, however.

"Have you ever written anything down, Ella? Sometimes it helps to get it out by putting it down on paper as a story or in a song." Nessie asked as she handed the girls each a hot mug of cocoa, and sat a jar of tiny marshmallows in front of them.

"I was scared to. Mom was always going through my stuff." She took a careful sip of the hot chocolate. "mmm. This is really good."

"Thanks. I make it the old-school way." She pointed to the stovetop where a pot filled with remnants of hot chocolate sat. "You know you can write here, right? No one here is going to read anything you don't want us to."

“I might. I usually just take it out on my old guitar or cello.” Ella laughed. She hoped the subject would move on to someone else soon.

“Speaking of which, want to go down, and play? I’ll do bass, you play guitar?” Jetty stood, and put her empty mug in the sink after rinsing it out. Ella followed suit, and they headed for the basement.

# Chapter 19 - Nathan

The filthy, brown-striped couch from the Fusons’ sat up on a work table in the middle of the state crime

lab. A tech was meticulously examining the piece with UV light while another took samples from various areas of the couch. The pillows were off, exposing a revolting collection of stains on the under fabric which was usually hidden from sight. Criminalist Rachel Anderson sighed, knowing this was going to be a very long day, but after finding out what the case involved, she would be there all month if it meant catching child traffickers and rapists. Carefully, she removed small pieces of fabric to be tested. Tiny, common threads that could yield enough evidence to put someone in jail for a very long time were carefully placed into vials of preservative liquid. She put the samples she had so far in a large divided bin, and called in her junior to take them to be tested.

. . .

Nathan Fuson sat in a waiting cell at the courthouse, furious that he was still being held. At least that was the impression he gave. Inside he was far less sure of himself. He had seen the news about the local prostitution sting in town. He knew they were very close to finding out he was linked to the prostitution ring involving minors. He had already been put on unpaid leave from work while he had to get this all sorted out. He had also heard Sweeny had been naming names, and was planning to take a plea bargain to lighten his sentence by a few years. If that was the case, then Nathan knew it was only a matter of time before they charged him with child abuse, rape, importuning, and if they dug much deeper the murder of his own son. He paced his cell like a caged animal, hoping his reputation and lawyer would be able to get him bail. As he started to feel panic rise in his chest, he heard voices coming closer in the hall. As the door opened, he saw the smiling face of his lawyer, Timothy Peters.

“I told you this would be a snap, Nathan. No worries. Just sign these papers, and I’ll walk you out with the nice officer here.” Timothy winked at the officer, who was not smiling in return.

“I can’t believe this bullshit, Tim! I should sue somebody!” Nathan made certain he had said it loud enough to be heard at the desk down the hall. Rolling his eyes, the officer led the pair out to the receiving desk where Nathan’s belongings were handed back to him. He had expected to see his wife there as well, but figured Stella probably decided any more time than necessary there would just hurt her reputation. He hurriedly filled out the forms, and got out while he could. On his way home, he stopped at the credit union to withdraw half of their life savings, but was told his wife had already been there, and taken it all out like he’d asked. Momentarily stunned, he nodded that of course he was aware of that, and made a hasty exit. He rushed home, hoping Stella had a plan, and that it involved him. They obviously

hadn't found enough evidence yet, but as soon as that old washed up cheer leader, and Sweeny started talking he would be a dead man. Nathan ran into his house, and started pitching things in his duffle bag.

"Stella?" He yelled, but she was nowhere to be found. He looked in her drawers and closet. Empty. The worthless bitch had ditched him! He frantically started making plans. He still had a couple thousand bucks in the safe. He'd go out of the country someplace; Mexico, or further South. Having neither the worldly knowledge nor language skills, he had no clue how he would pull it off. He knew if he stayed in the states he would be put away for life. Desperation and fear were clouding a brain that was murky on its best days. He turned the TV on in the bedroom as he packed, pulling his gun cases out from under the bed, and tossing them haphazardly on the top of the covers. As he walked to their closet, a news item caught his ears, and he froze in place. "…Lawyers for Sweeny claim to have evidence that Sweeny was just a

minor player in a much larger group of local men involved in underage prostitution. The names of those other men involved have not yet been released as investigators are seeking to call in and question them as we speak. We'll have breaking news on the situation as it comes in."

Nathan thrashed the TV off its stand with a whip of his duffle bag, and cursed the air. They would be on their way here any minute. He heard a car door slam, and ran to the window. Two men were getting out of a black Ford sedan with state plates. He could feel his face turn cold, and cool sweat beaded and fell down his face. Looking to the guns on his bed, he ran, and quickly pulled out his favorite revolver, loaded it, and walked down to the basement as he heard the men knocking at his front door. "Maybe he took off." A tall man in his late forties, Andy Doty had been with the local force since he was fresh out of the police academy. He had always heard stories about the Fusons, but had written it

off as jealousy. His older brother had played ball with Nathan Fuson, and to his family, the man was a god.

“He’s home. His car is here, and I saw somebody peeping out the blinds as we got out. I’m sure he knows why we’re here.” Detective Charley White was younger than Doty, but far more jaded. He was a combat veteran, and had hated the Deglow family who were always hanging out with Nathan. As they walked up the walkway, a single shot rang out clearly from inside the home.

“Shit!” Doty un-holstered, his gun, and called it in. “Shots fired! We’ve got a possible 46 at the Fuson residence.” He motioned for White to go around to the back, and he approached the front door with caution. White quickly made his way around to the back basement sliding glass door, and stopped cold. The door was spattered with blood. A lone form leaned horrifically up against the glass. Nathan Fuson was dead.

# Chapter 20 – Common Pain

Nessie stood at the top of the stairs listening to the lovely sounds of stringed instruments and laughter from below. She was never more grateful for the family's blessings. The sound of her cell phone ringing brought her back from her reverie.

"Hello?"

“May I please speak to the guardians of Ella Fuson?” A polite, old woman asked.

“This is she. May I ask who is calling?” Nessie was instantly on guard. She listened in bewilderment as the woman explained how Sweeny had named Mr. Fuson as the leader of a group of men who sold the services of under-aged girls, and that when the Sherriff’s detectives had come to arrest Mr. Fuson, he had committed suicide. The woman asked if Nessie would be able to vouch for Ella’s whereabouts at the time the apparent suicide occurred. Mrs. Fuson could not be found, and she had cleared out their bank account that morning. The woman asked if, considering what had transpired, she had had any contact from Mrs. Fuson, and if they still wanted to be Ella’s guardians.

“I understand. We have cameras with time stamped date on the outside of our home. Yes. Yes, we totally intend for her to stay here regardless. Actually, we are planning to legally adopt Ella.” Nessie couldn’t even believe they

would ask her if she wanted to dump the poor girl because of her family. When she hung up the phone, Nessie opened the freezer, and leaned against the cold door. She had to tell Ella, but she hated to interrupt as the girls were finally unwinding. Picking up her cell phone, she called Daniel.

“Hey, Hun.” Daniel’s voice was upbeat, but out of breath. “Sorry. Winded. Just came in from a shoot.”

“Daniel, Nathan Fuson committed suicide, and Stella has apparently left the country.” She waited for a reply.

“Oh.” He wasn’t certain what the proper response for something like this should be. On one level, he was actually relieved that the scumbag was out of Ella’s life. On another level, this poor girl had enough baggage to claim. Now add a dad that offed himself? He sighed. “I’ll call Tom. He should be able to file for us to declare permanent guardianship right away. Well, life is crazier than anything I could write. Should I fly home?”

“No. There’s nothing you can do. I’d welcome a good hug, but your voice helps. Is it horrible of me to be glad that man is gone? Especially now that I know what he did to kids? His own kids especially?” She shuddered.

“If it is, you’re in good company. I hope the guy rots in hell.” “Normally, I’d tell you that’s terrible, but this time I whole-heartedly agree. How am I going to tell her?” Nessie’s voice caught a little as she spoke.

“Oh, man. I guess you just tell her straight out. She’s been through enough. Just get it out, and deal with it as it goes. Make sure she understands that we’ve got her back. Let her know we’re hers now too. If she really wants us.” Daniel held the phone away from his face, and Nessie could hear someone calling to him. “Alright. I have to get back, Ness. Are you sure you’re ok?”

“I will be. I love you. Be careful, and call me in the morning.” “Love you too, Ness.” He hung up, and looked up at Ted who was waiting for direction on the next scene. With all the texting he and Ella had been doing

this week, it was only a matter of hours before his leading man became extremely preoccupied so he rushed Ted into the next scene with Cami. Ted was a fantastic actor, but Cami and he had absolutely no chemistry off screen. Daniel was thankful that their acting, and professionalism was able to cover that fact up.

Back in Ohio, Nessie placed her phone down on a coffee table in the living room, and walked downstairs to speak with Ella. She had no point of reference for all the experiences of this past week. All she had to go on was what her heart told her was correct. She knocked on the door of the music room where Ella and Jetty were laughing, and fumbling through their own rendition of Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire."

"Jetty, would you mind if I spoke to Ella alone for a bit?" Nessie gave her daughter a serious look that said there really was only one answer to this question.

“Sure. I’ll go grab a root beer upstairs.” She hopped up from her stool, and grudgingly left the room. Ella knew it had to be important, and case-related if Jetty had to leave the room.

“Is everything ok?” Ella hung the guitar back up on the wall, and followed Nessie out to the den area to sit on a couch beside her. “No, Honey. I’ve got some news that’s really not good.” She shook her head, and started fussing with her wedding band, a nervous habit she never could break. Ella could feel her face begin to get cool, and a nauseous feeling tightened itself in her stomach.

“This morning, your mother took your family’s savings, and left town. No one knows where she is, and it doesn’t appear that she plans to return.” Nessie watched Ella’s face. She was unreadable. To Ella, this was not dire news. It was actually not bad news at all. She didn’t really ever think she wanted to see her mother again. There had to be more if Nessie was this upset.

“Your father was released from custody on bail this morning...” “What? Why? Did he run off too?” Ella suddenly felt fear. If her dad thought she had anything to do with Mr. Sweeny’s confessions, he’d surely kill her.

“It was before the news broke about Mr. Sweeny’s confession, and your dad’s lawyer worked pretty fast.”

“Do I need to leave? Do they know where he is?” Ella’s hands and lower lip seemed to shake of their own accord.

“Honey, he won’t come after you. He killed himself this afternoon.” Nessie just blurted it out. There was no use trying to smooth it over; especially when thinking he was on the loose seemed to terrify the girl. Ella stopped. Her dad was dead? She sat trying to figure out how she felt. She was sure she should feel sad somehow, but she just couldn’t. She only felt relief. Ella looked up at Nessie, now curious about what this all meant. “What does this mean for me?”

“Well, you can stay with us. We want you to if it’s what you want. I’m so sorry all of this has happened. Do you have anything at your house that you want to retrieve? I can go with you once they allow us access.” Nessie placed an arm around Ella, and gave her a careful squeeze.

“I’m not sure. I’d like to get my books. Some photo albums, I guess. There’s really not much there I care about.” Ella shrugged. She felt a weird, almost inappropriate feeling of excitement. It felt like she was free for the first time in her life. “Can I tell Jetty?” Ella suddenly realized they’d left Jetty upstairs going out of her mind with curiosity.

“Sure.” Nessie worried that it hadn’t all sunk in yet for the girl, but how could it? With all that she had been through at the hands of her father, perhaps she really didn’t feel a normal sense of sadness for the loss of the only father figure she had ever known. The thought of Nathan being Ella’s only example of a father made

Nessie cringe. She went back into her studio, sat down at her desk, and opened her laptop. She needed to contact Tom, and get papers in order sooner than later. They could only shelter Ella so much from the coming court fiasco, and newspaper reporters. While she was still legally a minor, the Bentons needed to become her permanent legal guardians. Ella had already signed the documents Tom had sent over for full custody. The officer at the hospital had entered Mrs. Fuson's statement about giving up custody of Ella into the record which was making things move much smoother than anticipated. Now they needed to have a serious conversation with the girls about adopting Ella into their family so that they could give her the benefit of two parents fighting for her in whatever was to come.

Ella walked into the kitchen to where Jetty was sitting, doing her homework, and drinking hot chocolate flooded with mini marshmallows. Jetty looked up expectantly.

“Want one?” She lifted her mug up for display.

“Not yet.” Ella took a seat across from Jetty. She was shaky, and felt like she’d had too much caffeine.

“What happened? Is it bad? Is it about the case?”

“It’s crazy. My mom took all my folks’ money out of the bank, skipped town, and my dad killed himself.” She stated it matter-of-factly as if it were an everyday occurrence. Ella’s monotone voice coupled with her shaking hands, troubled Jetty.

“Are you ok?”

“I think so. I feel weird. I know I should be sad that he’s dead, but it doesn’t feel like sadness. I feel like you do when you thought you had a big test then find out it’s canceled or postponed. I feel relieved.”

She had become so detached from her family emotionally since her brother died that there truly was no connection to be broken even by death. She felt exhausted. Jetty got up from her seat at the kitchen

table, and walked to the sink to grab an empty mug from the rack. She poured the remainder of the freshly made hot chocolate between her mug, and the clean one she had retrieved for Ella.

“Marshmallows?” Jetty asked, holding the jug of micro-mini marshmallows up in the air.

“No thanks. I’ll take mine black.” She smirked, and welcomed the warm mug as Jetty handed it over the table.

“Nessie said I can stay here. Are you okay with that too? I don’t want to wear out my welcome. You guys have been nicer to me than anyone ever has.” For the first time since getting news about her family, Ella could feel tears forming, threatening to spill over. She worried Jetty might not truly want her there on a regular basis. What if she resented that Ella was living in her house after only knowing her about two weeks? What if she said she wanted her to go?

“Of course, it’s okay! I wouldn’t let you leave now if you tried. You’re my best friend in this town. To be honest, you’re my best friend in any town.” Jetty was thrilled Ella could stay with them. “Plus, now I only have half as many chores.” Jetty waggled her eyebrows. “Have you seen that driveway? No way am I shoveling that thing myself this winter.”

“Do you even know how to shovel snow? I thought you were a California girl?” Ella laughed.

“Northern California. We had plenty of snow. Not a lot, but enough to know how to shovel, Smartass.” Jetty tossed a mini marshmallow at Ella’s head.

Nessie stood in the hall outside of the kitchen listening to the exchange with a sad smile on her face. She waited for a pause in the conversation, and walked in to join them, taking a seat next to Jetty at the table.

“Daniel will be back in town the day after tomorrow. He said I could go ahead and discuss this with you two in his absence. It’s a pretty big deal, and we won’t go forward

with it without complete consent." Nessie looked from Jetty to Ella. Both girls seemed confused, but excited to find out what was going on.

"Ella, your papers were received, and quickly processed due to the current situation. You're officially an emancipated minor. With that in mind, I want you to consider another option. There are things only parents or permanent legal guardians are capable of doing for you. There are ways to protect, and block you from some of the craziness a case like this involves. There are the legal fees, doctors' bills, insurance, school costs. You are very mature for your age, but no seventeen-year-old should have all of this thrown at them all at once. Daniel and I have talked this over, and we would be honored if you would allow us to become your permanent guardians. We understand you are turning eighteen in just a few months, but you don't just need a roof over your head, or someone to help you through a bad time. You need and deserve a family who actually loves you."

“Yes! Say yes!” Jetty was practically jumping up and down in her seat with excitement.

Ella was stunned. She felt dizzy, and sick to her stomach, and happy all at once. No one had ever wanted her before she met the Bentons, and now an entire family wanted her. Her eyes stung as she wiped the tears that she could no longer hold back. It had to be a mistake. She looked at Nessie when she finally could make eye contact, and shook her head yes. Nessie walked around to her, and gave her a hug and a kiss on the top of her head.

“I heard you once say you didn’t want to inconvenience us, or be a bother. You are no bother ever, and we love having you here.” Nessie smiled, and wiped her own tears away while handing Ella a tissue. Jetty was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“So, does that mean we’re going to be sisters?” Jetty was curious just what this entailed.

“If we become legal guardians, Ella can keep her name, and you are just good friends, and roommates. However, I know I wouldn’t mind if you wanted to take it a step further. Then yes. You two would legally be stuck together.” She glared in mock horror. “For life!”

Jetty looked over at Ella, and nodded her head.

“I’m ok with that.” Jetty assured Ella who was still trying to register it all.

“Are you sure? Do you really want me? I’ve got more baggage than a 767.”

“I’m really good at unpacking. We move a lot remember?” Jetty hugged Ella. “So, do you want to be my sister or not?” She stood back expectantly waiting for the answer.

“If you guys really want me, I’d love to. Nobody ever wanted me around before. Are you sure?” Looking from Jetty to Nessie, she tried to judge their reactions. She just couldn’t believe it could be true after having nothing

but bullying and beatings and abuses from her biological family. She was scared to believe it.

“Yes, Hun. We are 100% sure. So please quit doubting our sincerity. I know things have been insane, and I know we’ve only known you for a few weeks, but I also know that we love you no matter if we met you last month or when you were born. You need us, and we want you in our lives. It’s not entirely altruistic either.” Nessie grinned, and put an arm on Ella’s shoulder. Ella had ceased to jump or be startled by any contact with the Bentons. It was something that pleased Nessie to no end. Knowing that Ella knew she had nothing to fear in any way from them made her feel that the girl would truly feel at home and safe with them.

“Any chance to hear you play guitar on a regular basis is a pleasure.” Nessie lifted her hand from Ella’s shoulder, and left the two girls to chat excitedly about what had just been decided. She turned as she was leaving the

kitchen, and put a hand on her hip in a manner that said she meant business.

“No more living out of a suit case, Ella. Tomorrow we get you some things of your own. Lord! You have no idea how hard it has been for me to restrain myself from shopping for you!” Nessie sighed with relief. “Alright. I’m off to call Daniel, and fill him in on all that has transpired. Also, to warn him of the hit the credit card will be taking in the morning. You two wind down, and don’t stay up too late.” She left them as she walked off to her studio.

Jetty’s eyes went huge with excitement. She might not be a spoiled rich girl who shopped all the time, and always wore designer duds, but the idea of a shopping trip to outfit Ella’s wardrobe, and bedroom meant she too would get to shop for new clothes, and she would not pretend that was not exciting no matter how much she preached about the evils of materialism. “Oh, man. I know this is totally untimely since the circumstances are

awful, but I am so happy right now!" Jetty once again was hopping up and down in her seat, dimples fully exposed due to the huge grin on her face.

"I've had to buy my own clothes since I was old enough to have a paper route. I don't think I've had anything that wasn't from the thrift store or clearance rack since I was a little kid other than the stuff we bought last week. It's going to be so weird walking into a store, and buying new clothes right off the rack." She had collected photos of designer clothes in her scrap book for years. She remembered the day she was able to walk into Old Navy, and buy a jacket with her own money. Her mother had made her return it, and instead made Ella give half the paycheck to her to cover gas for the car Nathan allowed her to drive. It had been humiliating, and heart-breaking to return the new coat. Ella breathed deeply. She was still getting used to the fact that she would never again fear being awoken from sleep by a stranger's hands pulling her out of bed, or yelling voices screaming

horrible things at her. She could come into the house without a fear that today would be the day Bill was there to have beers with her dad. Her dad. He was gone forever. His sneering face was burned into the backs of her eyelids. She still smelled his breath, and heard his voice in her mind telling her she'd never make it. These people didn't really want her. How could they? They're better than her. They just feel sorry for her. This is just their current charity case. They'd get tired of her, and dump her off sooner or later. Daniel was a man like any other. He probably had friends who would question him about taking in a known whore. One of them was bound to say or do something, and that would ruin everything. What about Ted? Did she really think he would keep seeing her after the trial starts, and the news reports on all that her family is guilty of? All that she herself was guilty of. Ella's hands shook, and her eyes filled with tears. She stared off into nothingness as she heard her

father's voice roaring at her, as he reached to grab her by the throat.

"Ella?" Jetty saw Ella's eyes glaze over with tears, and watched her shaking uncontrollably. "Ell? Hey! You ok?"

Ella shook her head, and wiped the tears from her eyes with her sleeve.

"No, but I will be." She smiled. "It's just a lot all at once. I'm bushed. Ready to go on up?" Ella stood; trying to vanquish the demons from her mind's eye. She drank the last of her hot chocolate, and placed the mug in the sink after rinsing it out. "You weren't here just now again. Does that happen a lot?" Jetty looked at her with concern. Ella was embarrassed. Would Jetty be freaked out by her flashbacks? They had gotten worse recently since being away from home. Now that she wasn't constantly in fear of physical harm, her mind seemed to be gradually dealing with the years of physical, emotional and sexual abuses. She felt broken, and didn't want to seem unworthy of this new existence the

Bentons were offering. Ella's silence made Jetty regret the way she had asked. Had she upset Ella?

"It's ok. I was just worried. Maybe you ought to talk to someone about it. Besides me, I mean. You can always talk to me, but I don't have a clue how to really help. I've thought about talking to someone, and I've not been through anything comparable to you." Jetty hoped she could say the right thing to help Ella feel more at ease as they walked upstairs. Knowing Nessie was downstairs out of ear-shot, Ella closed the door to Jetty's room, and sat down on one of her large beanbag chairs.

"You've been through more than most. Did you ever tell your folks about what happened on the bus?" Ella wondered. Jetty looked towards her door nervously. She had never told anyone except Ella about the school bus. Obviously, all the kids in the back of that bus knew what had happened, but she had never talked to anyone about it except Ella in an effort to show solidarity. She felt like a hypocrite suddenly for suggesting Ella get help

for her troubles when she had no plans of doing so herself. She had read several self-help books, and they were all so touchy feely, and new-age. It all felt very fake to her. She didn't understand how paying a lot of money to talk to some stranger about her feelings would do any good.

"No. I never did." Jetty flopped down on a matching beanbag chair next to Ella. "It would only hurt them if I told them now. There's nothing they could do to help. It's done. We moved. I don't ever have to see those guys again, and I can't prove anything. I still feel guilty though." Jetty shrugged, and leaned back, propping her legs up on the fuzzy pink foot stool between the chairs. Ella thought about it. She could understand the guilt. Those boys probably messed with other girls after Jetty. The guys who had hurt Ella definitely hurt other girls and women. Who knew how many girls Mr. Sweeny had molested? Ella had no idea how many teenaged girls and young women her father had on call at any given time.

Ella shuddered thinking about the coming trial. She hoped there would be some way that she wouldn't have to testify. Surely there were plenty of other witnesses without needing her. Her father had been the mastermind behind that horror show, and he was now dead. Ella wasn't sure talking to some therapist would make any difference.

"I'll go if you go." Ella looked over at Jetty, whose head was leaned far back on the chair, her long auburn hair draping down the back of it. It wasn't a very fair deal considering everyone in the family knew Ella needed help, but Jetty's experiences had been a secret matter. Still, Ella wasn't about to go sit on some stranger's couch and spill her life story alone no matter what their qualifications may be.

"I'll just say I need you there for moral support. Aren't shrinks bound by patient confidentiality agreements?" Ella grinned. "Yeah, but I'm not the patient so I'm not sure that would work. I'm just not sure I'm ready to tell

Mom what happened to me. I don't know how she'll take it, or if she'll be disappointed in me. I hate seeing Mom cry too. She had a role once that she had to cry a lot for, and I hated it."

"She'll be fine. She won't treat you weird. She heard a lot of the things that happened to me in detail, and she said she was proud of me for being able to get it out, and face it." Ella propped her own feet up on the stole now. The fluffy fabric felt good against her bare feet.

Outside the door, Nessie had stopped. She hadn't intended to eavesdrop. She had only stopped because she loved hearing the girls' laughter and giggles as they talked together. She stood frozen in her spot, unable to move upon hearing Jetty mention something bad that had happened to her that she couldn't tell Nessie yet. As guilty as she felt for snooping, she couldn't move. Bless Ella for trying to get her to seek help as well, and for trusting that Nessie would handle it in a manner that would not upset Jetty. Jetty wasn't entirely sold on this.

She didn't want to say that it was different for her because Nessie was her mom. That felt mean somehow considering Ella was soon to be a member of the family, and she was a friend. However, Jetty did think it would be different.

"I don't know how to tell her. How do I bring it up after so long? I was twelve when it happened. It's been five years, and you're the first person I ever told."

"Well, if I'm going to have to talk to some old guy with a clipboard you can too!" Ella jokingly booted Jetty's feet off the foot rest. "And quit saying stuff like what I went through was worse than what you went through. Rape is rape. It's all bad, and we lived through it. You deserve to be respected for surviving it. Your mom would be proud of you." Ella was being sincere now. She hated that Jetty seemed to think her experience wasn't as bad as Ella's.

On the other side of the bedroom door, Nessie couldn't find her breath. She wanted to storm into the room demanding names, and rip whoever had hurt Jetty

into tiny pieces. It took an enormous amount of willpower to restrain her desire to go full mother bear. She felt faint as she slowly and quietly made her way to her own bedroom at the end of the hallway, and closed the door. Jetty had been raped? When she was twelve? Her little girl was hurt, and she had no clue. How could that happen? She thought back to where they were when Jetty was that age, and realized that was when they lived in Texas. How could something that devastating occur without Nessie realizing it? She and Jessalee had always had a good relationship. They had always talked freely. Though Nessie was stern on many things, she always tried to listen to Jetty's perspective before passing on

any motherly punishment. She had always considered herself over-protective, and alert. How could this have happened? When could it have happened? She went to school, and came home. There was no time other than school that she was away from family. Could this have

happened at the school? She started remembering those times now. That had been the first and only other time Jetty had attended public school. She had been so excited, and was doing really well in classes until one day she came home, and begged them to let her go back to her private tutors. Nessie now wanted to run to Jetty so badly, and ask her to tell her what had happened. Guilt never sat well with Nessie. What could cause more guilt than this? She had somehow failed to protect her child, and had no clue how it had happened. Nessie drew a hot bath in her Jacuzzi, turned on her favorite classical recording, and stepped in to her giant tub. She lay back on the bath pillow, closed her eyes, and wept.

Jetty hopped up, and walked over to her door, slowly opening it, and listening to her mom's bath running.

"She couldn't have heard us, right?" She looked back at Ella as she peered down the hall.

“No. We were being quiet, and she sounds like she’s unwinding for the day. I’m beat too. I think I’ll head to bed. Night.” Ella yawned, and stretched as she rolled off the awkward bean bag chair. It had been much easier to plop down in than it was to exit with her sides still sore. She had healed quite a bit over the week, but it would be months before her ribs were truly healed. She shooed Jetty away, and instead opted to pull herself up from the floor, and gradually stand. It was painful to watch, but Jetty knew Ella wanted to learn to manage it herself.

“Night, Sis.” Jetty smiled as Ella left the room. She said it in jest, but it had been fun to let the words escape her mouth for the first time. If all went well, legally at least, they would soon be sisters. She had only known Ella for a few weeks, but she liked her better than most of the people she had known her entire life. Ella felt like a person out of place. When she was away from the people who treated her like crap, she changed into a confidant, talkative person. At school, or when they had

been anywhere in town that could have people who knew her, she was docile, and frightened of drawing attention to herself. Knowing more about Ella's past made it all make sense, but it also had Jetty convinced that as soon as they were able to leave town, they should. Jetty had already been accepted into several colleges across the country. One was in Illinois, and several were in California. She had heard Ella saying she hadn't bothered to send any forms in because she couldn't afford to go to college. She had planned to get a full-time job, and take night classes at the local community college. Jetty would encourage Ella to start filling out forms right away. It really had to have been strange to suddenly be thrown in with a group of people who actually gave a damn about you. Even though it was a positive change, the culture shock had to really mess with Ella's mind, and stress her out. Jetty yawned, kicked off her shoes and pants, and climbed into bed. Ella lay in her own bed pondering the next day's shopping trip. She

slipped under the soft, smooth sheets, and pulled the warm, fluffy comforter up over her as well. The bed was a queen-sized giant. The mattress was like lying on a gigantic pillow, and there were three pillows of varying firmness for her to choose from. Just two weeks ago at this time, she would have been crammed onto a twin mattress with broken box springs that poked up in parts. She had no sheets or pillow cases; just a ratty old pillow, a blanket she had bought with her own money, and a worn-out sheet. Her family was actually well off by middle class standards, but her parents considered any money spent on her behalf a waste. She would have had to sleep very lightly as she could be awoken at any time by one of her father's drunken friends to fulfill a debt. That had started when she was seven when she had begun to look mature for her age. One night her father had his usual group of buddies over, all of whom were coaches, ex-high school jocks, or guys from the factory. She knew her father was not a great poker player. He

often had to run out to the ATM to pay off a bad hand. That night she heard a big argument. Her father was roaring mad as usual, but the other man was even angrier.

“Well gimme another damn girl then! You owe me now, Fuson!” There was loud laughing from the other men upon hearing this outburst. After a while it quieted down, and she went back to sleep. She woke up to a rough hand pushing up her nightshirt while his other hand covered her mouth. She could hear her dad telling the guy not to leave any noticeable marks. That had always been the rule you didn’t break with his other girls.

Ella tossed uncomfortably in her sleep in the Benton house, far removed from the scene that now replayed in her mind. She cried silently, praying for the man to hurry up and finish with her so she could get a shower, and huddle back in her bed. It was dark, and she couldn’t see his face. He said nothing. His grunts

sickened her, and his actions hurt her in a way no child should have to hurt. The smell of beer on his breath, and sweat stung at her nostrils, making her have to fight back the urge to throw up. She fought to keep her nose above his hand lest he would suffocate her in his drunkenness. It was probably only a few minutes in total, but it felt like hours as she chanted a prayer in her head over and over again. Just let her live through this, please let this be the last time, please let this be the last time. The weight lifted, her nightgown was pulled back down, and he was gone. Her father's shadow stood in the doorway for a moment, then vanished as well followed by distant laughter. It was not the last time she was used as a poker payoff, and inevitably cruel nicknames followed from her dad's friends whenever they would see her out in public. As recently as the previous month, she had been used as payment for her father's debts. It was then that she discovered the identity of one of her long-time users; that day after school when Mr. Sweeny called her into

the sound-proof practice room for his pay off. As he forced a hand down her shirt, Ella saw the jersey number on the side of his state football ring: #2.

# Chapter 21 – Mental Break

"Wake up!" Jetty pounced on the foot of Ella's bed. Ella muttered something incoherent under her breath, and covered her head with a soft pillow. Jetty bounced once more for affect. "Ella! C'mon! You've got

to get up if you're going to help me and Mom put a dent in Dad's movie profits."

Ella could hear the happy excitement in Jetty's voice. She reluctantly removed her pillow shield, and opened her sleepy eyes. The light stung at first. She had not slept well again. The nightmares were getting worse. It felt like she was being punished for thinking she could escape her father's grasp. Even in this huge, safe, loving home she was still being tortured by her own mind. "I'm awake. Stop bouncing." Ella threw her legs over the side of the bed, and stood on wobbly legs.

"I've already had a cup of coffee. There's a fresh pot downstairs once you get ready. Mom said we're driving to Columbus to shop. Far out of town, and lots of awesome stores." Jetty had been thrilled when Nessie had informed her that she too could pick out a few new outfits, and some trinkets for her room. Usually she had to do extra chores for such a treat. Nessie had practically fallen all over her with hugs when she entered the

kitchen that morning. Jetty wasn't about to complain though as it meant she was about to make out like a bandit at the stores. She ran back downstairs to dig out three travel mugs for the nearly two-hour drive to central Ohio. Nessie sat patiently waiting at the kitchen table while reading the news on her tablet. Her reading glasses had slid halfway down her nose, and she leaned back casually in her seat against the wall. She was dressed in a luxurious, coral cable-knit V-neck sweater, blue jeans, and a comfortable pair of riding boots. Her auburn hair was pulled back in a haphazard bun. She had probably just thrown the outfit together, but Nessie Benton always looked elegant. Even when she was wearing bunny slippers, an old robe, and pajamas, she looked striking. Jetty looked quite a bit like Nessie, other than her hair. Jetty's was thick, darker, and had a natural curl to it that Nessie adored. She definitely had hair like her father's, though Daniel kept his so short no one would ever guess. Nessie had once loved running her

fingers through it and had not totally given up that he would let it grow out, and buck the current trend to shave it all while working on a production.

“Is she ready?” Nessie looked over at her daughter who was busy rummaging through cabinets. “Hon, they’re in the one under the microwave. You’re tearing the kitchen apart.” Nessie shook her head.

“Got them!” Jetty pulled out three large travel tumblers, and began filling them with coffee from the carafe. Ella crept into the room, still yawning, but fully dressed, washed, and ready.

“Great timing, Sleepyhead. Let’s grab our coffees and pile into the Volvo. I’m guessing you two are riding in back?” It was a silly question. She knew they wouldn’t sit apart for two hours as they plotted their shopping adventure.

As they drove, Nessie listened to Jetty trying to convince Ella that there was nothing wrong with picking out whatever she needed. Ella was feeling a bit awkward

about spending someone else's money, but Jetty assured her that she was part of the family now, and she had seventeen years of catching up to do. Nessie laughed out loud at that. There would be some reining in to do with Jetty, it seemed. Nessie had been thinking about what she had heard the girls talking about last night. She couldn't shake it from her mind. She had to find the right time and way to discuss it with Jetty. She couldn't bear dwelling on the fact that Jetty had held this in for nearly six years. While she was grateful Ella was there for her daughter to confide in, she needed Jetty to know she could also talk to her mother. The fact was, both girls needed to talk to someone much more studied on these matters. It was yet another topic to raise at the right time. Daniel would arrive home tonight, and Nessie would discuss it with him. She needed his support on all of this. He was always able to stabilize Nessie when she would otherwise feel like running full force into the situation. Tact was Daniel's strong game.

As they approached the campus-like shopping center which was located off the highway loop that circled around the entire city, Jetty's leg bounced excitedly up and down like it had since she was a little kid. During their drive, the two had mapped out their shopping strategy; tops and pants at all the various clothing stores first, then to the North Face store for coats and boots. After that they would just wander around to any shop that looked like fun. Nessie had not made time to shop for anything new in ages. Everyone thought they were wealthy beyond care, and that was not so. While ever thankful for all she had, and knowing fully that she was wealthier than most, she still did not feel right spending to excess on herself. She had grown up relatively poor in the very state they now called a temporary home near Toledo. Just once she would give in to a bit of a splurge. She did need a warmer coat for Ohio's winter temperatures, and she could always use it for years on skiing trips.

“Oh, yeah. This is the first stop.” Jetty pulled open her favorite satchel which also doubled as her purse. She pulled out Ella’s scrap journal to Ella’s surprise, and pointed to the sweater Ella had pasted onto a page called ‘Dream Wardrobe.’ Ella looked into the shop window at the sweater on display. It was a beautiful shade of turquoise, cable knit, with a thick V-neck. It was actually quite similar to Nessie’s sweater. Ella had always wanted one. She had bought a thin knock off from the local grocery store with a department store inside, but it was itchy, and poorly made. She had somewhat envied the more popular girls who always seemed to wear designer clothes, and have new things instead of worn out knock offs. She knew better than to judge others by their belongings, and didn’t hold a grudge towards the wealthier girls, but she had wished just once she could buy something new just for herself without worrying that her mom would steal it, or make her take it back because it was too good for her. Today was her just once

moment. She walked into the store, and was greeted by the clerk. Ella walked over to the neatly stacked sweaters, and pulled her size out of the pile. It was soft, and warm, and didn't smell like a mixture of smoke and too much fabric freshener like the clothes at the thrift shop. Ella looked over at Jetty excitedly. "Try it on! I'm getting one too, but I like the navy blue one." Jetty picked up her sweater, and walked around the store looking at the other clothes as Ella made her way towards the dressing rooms. After Ella came out beaming with joy, Jetty grabbed her arm, and pulled her to the other side of the store to find a button-down shirt to go under it, a scarf, and slacks. They each put an outfit together, and caught up with Nessie who had been chatting up the sales woman.

"These two are mine." Nessie grinned as the girls hefted the clothing up onto the sales counter. After several more stores, Ella had acquired five new outfits which could be mixed and matched into many different outfits.

She felt like royalty walking around with so many bags, but was happy to drop the load off at the car. "Alright, my girls. Let's find fabulous coats and boats, and then get some lunch." Nessie truly loved including Ella as one of her own. She had always planned to have more children, but nature had other ideas. Two years after Jetty had been born Nessie had a miscarriage. The following year she was rushed in for an emergency hysterectomy. It had broken her heart, and made her even more over protective about Jessalee. A tinge of pain hit Nessie. She had not been protective enough. She could feel her eyes brim with tears as she followed the girls across the street to the large outdoor outfitter's store. She wiped the tears away quickly. It was getting harder to just walk around with the knowledge of her daughter's rape, and not be able to talk to her about it.

"Thank you so much." Ella turned around to face Nessie as they entered the store. Nessie was taken off guard as Ella threw her arms around her in a giant hug.

“You are very welcome.” She broke the hug happily, but Ella caught a glimpse of Nessie’s still teary eyes. Jetty had run on ahead, and was already trying on coats in the aisle.

“Are you ok?” Ella questioned.

“Yes. That cold wind just always makes my eyes tear up a bit.” Nessie gave a convincing answer with a smile. Ella joined Jetty, and started exploring her options. After many trials and some comical errors, the trio returned to the Volvo with coats, boots, and fluffy hats for the winter. Jetty was amazed at the loot she had made off with. She was certain she’d be raking leaves, and shoveling snow a lot over the next few months as payment. Nessie decided to drive downtown to an Irish family pub she had been to years ago during a Broadway production run at the Ohio Theater. It was in the old part of town near German Village, with many old Brownstones, and historical buildings. The pub was busy, and cheerful, and most of the TVs showed an OSU

football game. CNN played on the others. As they took their seats in a secluded booth towards the back, Jetty watched the news flash by on a screen. The sound was down so that the game could be heard. There were priorities in a college town after all.

Jetty watched the ticker, and imagined what the woman was saying on screen. She poked Ella's arm, then pointed to the screen.

"Today in breaking news, my butt really itches. I would totally scratch it right now, but this is national news after all. That's why I'm making this face." Jetty spoke with a serious tone, and mock frustration as Ella joined in.

"I'm not really a reporter either. The real one is tied up under this desk." Ella laughed, but stopped cold as the next story popped up on the screen. The image in the upper corner was clearly her father standing next to Mr. Sweeny.

"Oh, no." Ella looked at Jetty. Nessie was looking down at the menu.

“Nessie?” Ella got her attention, and motioned to the screen. Nessie went pale as she watched the reporter’s lips moving as a video of Mr. Sweeny being led away in a bright orange jumper played across the screen. This was a national news program. She knew they wouldn’t be able to show a photo of Ella or mention her name as she was a minor, but from now onward anything related to the case would be a circus of reporters. The waitress came up as they were glued to the screen.

“Would you like me to turn the sound up for you?” The girl asked as she pulled her notepad from her apron. Jetty and Ella looked plaintively to Nessie.

“No, thank you.” She nudged Jetty who was seated beside her. “Well we’ve still got to eat, girls. I’ll have a Rueben and root beer in a frosty mug.”

They ordered, and sat back to watch the screen till the story changed once more. Jetty looked across the table at Ella. “Are you ok?”

“I will be after this is all over. Has Tom told you anything new, Nessie?” Ella looked up hopefully at her guardian.

“Nothing new. I’ll tell you as soon he does. We should know soon if you’ll have to actually testify, or if a deposition will be good enough. I’m really hoping for the latter.” She put an arm around Jetty next to her, and hugged her tight, kissing her atop the head. “I can’t imagine how or why anyone would hurt either of my girls.”

Jetty was happy for the hug, but looked up at Ella concerned. Why did she say it like that? Nessie released Jetty gently from her hug, and sat back, looking her in the eyes.

“You both know that you can tell us anything, right? About anything no matter what.” Nessie unconsciously nodded as she spoke as if willing Jetty to understand.

Jetty’s eyes went wide with fear and shame. She looked to Ella who wasn’t sure what to say, but hoped Jetty would jump at the chance to talk to her mom. Jetty

looked down at the table, unable to say a word. She hoped the moment would pass, and the food would arrive without anything further, but Nessie could tell her daughter knew something was up. If she could just get her to open up.

“I am proud of both of you. I hope you know that.” Nessie dropped it, but looked to Ella, who was watching Jetty’s nervous face with empathy. Maybe she would speak alone with Ella about it later.

The food arrived, and everyone ate in relative silence. They would need to head home as soon as they left if they wanted to get home before dark. Jetty ate only about half of her food. She felt slightly nauseous. After folding her napkin over her plate, she couldn’t look her mom in the face.

“You know, right?” Jetty felt sick as she spoke. Nessie put down her drink glass, and felt a lump in her throat begin to form. She turned to Jetty who refused to make eye contact, and she put both arms around her.

“Oh, my girl. I’m so sorry.” She felt Jetty’s shoulders lurch in a sob, and she was glad they were back to themselves in the darkened restaurant. Jetty hated calling attention to herself, and Nessie knew it. Ella was relieved that Jetty finally had it off her shoulders, even though this was bound to be hard at first for both Jetty and Nessie.

“I’m sorry,” was all Jetty could mutter into her mother’s shoulder. “Honey, you’ve got nothing to be sorry for. Absolutely nothing. I am so very proud of you. I’m just so unbelievably sorry I wasn’t there for you. Please look at me.” Nessie waited until Jetty was able to look her in the eyes. Jetty’s eyes were red and tears streaked her face.

“I don’t know exactly what happened, but I know it wasn’t your fault. I also know that I love you like crazy. We don’t have to talk about this now, but I really want both of you to be able to talk to someone, ok? A professional. You both deserve to be able to work through this. Ok?”

Jetty and Ella nodded as Jetty wiped her eyes with a wetted napkin. Nessie left cash to cover the bill and a hefty tip, and they made a hasty exit. The trip home was deathly silent. All three were in their own worlds. Ella was thinking over the day's events fondly. She marveled to herself over her new clothes. Despite everything she was truly excited to have warm, new clothes that actually fit her. She was happy for Jetty. It was rough, but Nessie was such a great mom. Nessie would lead both girls gently through getting therapy, and moving on. She wouldn't dwell on what she couldn't change. Ella envied that ability. Jetty wondered how long her mom had known. She was glad to have it out in the open, but she still felt awkward about it and ashamed. She didn't want her mom to think she was a victim or something. Having Nessie hug her, and tell her it would all be ok though; it meant the world to her. She felt guilty for feeling like it was a shameful thing after all that Ella had been through. Nessie knew better than to prod about

exactly what had occurred. All that mattered now was that Jetty understood that she could be open about it.

“Home, sweet home.” Nessie looked in the rearview mirror at the girls, and smiled. “Let’s get our bags in the house, and unwind before dinner. Daniel will be home in the morning for a few days.” Nessie was glad Daniel would be home to share the burden of information. She needed to discuss Jetty with him. She wasn’t sure how he would handle it. Daniel tended to be more stoic, and capable of seeing everything logically, but he was also very kind and his family was his life. How would he process the information that his own daughter had been raped? After the girls were safely in the house, Nessie went back for the rest of the packages alone. Upon closing the back to the Volvo, she heard someone walking up the driveway. She held her car keys tightly, ready to push the panic button, and hop inside to lock herself in for safety. “Vanessa Benton?” A young man

with a recorder in his hand, and a notebook under his arm walked cautiously towards her.

“It’s okay. I’m with the Newspaper. I’m sorry to barge over like this.” “This is really not the time, and it is not okay.” Nessie couldn’t believe the nerve of this young man. No matter how polite or respectful he behaved, this was truly uncalled for.

“I really am sorry for this, but by tomorrow this place will be swarming with reporters and news vans. I know it’s not cool to come uninvited like this, but I’m coming with information for you as well.” Matt was not even a full reporter yet. His father was the head editor at the Dayton Daily News, and he was just a Junior at local Wright State.

“I know I’m no famous reporter, but that’s exactly how I got the information I now have to offer you.” He had Nessie’s attention. “In exchange for what? Ella is a minor still, and the papers aren’t permitted to publish her name or location. How is it they know to have news

crews at our home?" Nessie looked around as the nosey old woman next door was peering out her side window. "Come inside." She ushered him in the back door to the surprise of Jetty who was pouring a cup of coffee at the kitchen counter. "Why's he here?" Jetty stood behind the long island counter in the kitchen. She glared at the guy who had slipped into her back door with a clipboard and a recorder. Jetty had seen this too many times, and it always made her angry.

"He's a local reporter. It's okay. You need you to go downstairs with Ella for a while, Okay? I'll come get you girls after a while." Nessie shooed Jetty off with her mug of coffee in hand, as Jetty gave her a weary look, and headed down to the den to join Ella. "Alright. What is going on?" Nessie sat down at the table, and pointed to a chair with a demanding gesture that no wise person would ignore. Nessie Benton might be well-known for her generosity, and kindness, but she was also

protecting her children, and heaven help anyone who might try to harm one of her girls.

“You’re right. Ella is a minor, and can’t be named as a victim of Mr. Sweeny in the news, but after her dad killed himself, and the whole prostitution ring made national news, they mentioned his surviving daughter who was abandoned by her mom to the guardianship of a local home. Your names were leaked pretty quickly to the news, and considering who you and your husband are it made it that much more sensationalized. You won’t be able to avoid it for much longer. Every TV show in the country will be all over this by morning. The young woman they arrested earlier this week told them about how Mr. Fuson would use his daughter to pay off debts to the guys involved in the ring. She said she and another cheerleader tried to tell a cop about it because Ella was just a little kid, but they were threatened with jail time, and worse if they told anyone else. The cop was Officer Deglow. He died a few years ago. He and his son

were in on all of it. Even if they don't mention her by name, Ella is mentioned all over the place, and the fact that she was used as collateral by her dad from the time she was little till as recently as a few months ago with Mr. Sweeny is going to come out. Most people around had only heard rumors, and never knew the girl was being raped since she was seven years old according to the stories. At least, I'd hope no decent person knew that, and didn't say anything." Matt read off the information he'd written down while eavesdropping on his father and his sources.

Nessie sat listening to it all, trying to take in all that she was hearing without losing her mind with anger towards all the adults that had failed Ella and the other older girls involved. The wonderful girl she had come to love as part of the family, and was about to legally adopt, had been hurt so devastatingly for so long, yet she was still defiantly amazing. It made Nessie even prouder of her. Nessie looked up at Matt, and waited for

him to go on. “You’ve given me a lot to think about. I honestly don’t know what I could add to this story other than to say we are going to work our hardest to make sure it has a happy ending. Ella has filed for, and been granted emancipated minor status, and Daniel and I are going Monday to formally adopt her as our own so that we can more fully protect her from what’s coming. It sounds like it may be a bit rougher than we had thought, but that makes me even more eager to get it done.” Nessie stood, and hoped Matt would take that as a sign that it was time for him to depart.

“I’m glad to hear something good will come to her. I know most folks around here will be too, but they might treat her like an oddity as well. I’ll go now, but I’d still like to be able to get your first newspaper interview once things calm down; whenever you’re ready. I’m not telling my dad any of what you just told me. I’ve got a little sister too. I’m a good guy, but I’m also only human, and

this would help my career, obviously." Matt shrugged, and headed for the door.

"It will be quite a while before we are prepared to do that, but you have my word." Nessie walked him to the front door so he didn't have to walk around the drive again now that the sun had set.

"Are you sure you don't want to switch fields now before it's too late. You don't seem like the reporter type. I mean that in a good way."

"That's exactly why I need to become one." He grinned, and walked off down the sidewalk. Once Nessie had closed the door behind him, she walked over to the living room couch, and dropped down. She was emotionally exhausted. Just when she had thought she had heard it all, it got worse. Poor Ella. Nessie simply couldn't wrap her mind around how people could be so evil. Ella had been a little girl when her own father sold her to pay debts. She had been used as human collateral for ten years. A decade of horror. Nessie wished

desperately for Daniel's presence. She knew Jetty had wanted to have a normal Senior high school year, but as soon as they were legally allowed, Nessie vowed to move them all far away from this town. She hoped the girls had settled in downstairs, but knew they would be curious so she called them upstairs, and walked back into the kitchen so she could reach for a bottle of wine out of her kitchen wine rack. Jetty and Ella ran upstairs, and entered the room breathlessly waiting to hear what the man had wanted. Jetty had recognized him as a reporter right away.

"We are in for unwanted visitors tomorrow. Apparently, someone leaked a ton of information to the press."

"Can't they get arrested for harassing us?" Jetty was getting angry.

"They can't just come up to our house. It's private property." "They can park on the street as long as the police don't make them leave though, and wait us out. I'm going to run out to the store for some bread, and

basics so we can basically stay in comfortably till they leave. Your dad should be home early in the morning. Hopefully, before the crowd comes. You girls are staying home from school. I'm sorry, Jetty. I know you just got a role in the play, but I'm afraid it may be wise to switch back to tutors. This isn't going to just blow over soon." Nessie sighed deeply, and looked up at her daughter's stricken face.

Ella looked over at jetty's disappointed face in sadness. She felt awful for bringing this on them. Jetty sighed dramatically. "Okay. It sucks, but okay. At least I won't have to see Mike Deglow ever again." Jetty flopped down next to her mother, and leaned into her for a hug. Ella felt horrible. It was her fault they had to deal with all of this.

"I'm sorry, Jetty. You guys don't need to do this. I don't want you to have troubles because of me." Ella stood off at the edge of the room feeling suddenly very alone.

“Don’t you dare do that.” Nessie rose from her seat on the couch, and crossed the room towards Ella, making sure she didn’t scare her. “No way, sweetie. Please. I know what you’re thinking, and you’re wrong. If you think for one second that we are going to let you get dumped off, or get tired of you because of all this commotion, you could not be more wrong. If anything, I want to grab you up in a huge bear hug, and fight off anyone who even dares to try to mess with you or Jetty ever again. You are a blessing to this family, and a wonderful girl. You had best get used to hearing stuff like that too, because I tell it like I see it, and my girls are awesome.” Nessie made sure Ella made eye contact, and held out her arms for a hug. Ella hugged onto Nessie for dear life. She cried like a baby, sobbing and worn out. Even though it was so loving and kind, the emotional outpouring was overwhelming for her. She felt like she would wake up in the morning back in her old room,

with the smell of beer, cigars, and pizza in the air accompanied by angry voices, and rough treatment.

“Thank you.” Ella let go of Nessie, and wiped the tears from her face. She was scared to trust it all. She was terrified of losing the security that life with the Bentons allowed, and the sense of belonging that they encouraged. However frightened she was, the idea of not trying to give this a chance was more unbearable than the fear of losing them. She would risk it. She would go all in, and throw her faith into this small group of people who took her in, were happy to have her, and had so much in common with her in ways that mattered more than blood.

# Chapter 22 – Spin Doctor

A knock at the door at 6:00 am signaled the start of the media circus that would be the new normal for the foreseeable future. Nessie peered out the shades of her bedroom at the trucks and reporters below trying to push past barriers to get a better shot on the front lawn. These were mostly the entertainment media trucks. They fed off of real-life dramas attached to any famous family. The parasite-like cameramen swarmed the front lawn while their clean-cut media darling hosts sat far away giving sympathetic commentary. Both Nessie and Daniel had been interviewed by these types many times at film premieres, and on locations. The newer breed of

shows were far worse than previous incarnations. Even mainstream news networks now catered to a more paparazzi-style of news reporting. She recognized several faces down below, and was more than happy to report trespassers to the police department. Over the past few weeks, Nessie's respect for the local police department had soared. It had shirked its shady past, and become a model of what you hope for, should you ever need help. Nessie watched as the police officers waved off reporters, paparazzi, and nosy neighbors alike.

"They're just going to keep coming." Jetty stood in Nessie's doorway frowning. She'd seen this happen to lots of celebrities back in LA. Nessie sighed. Perhaps it was time she called on Max. He was a slimy tabloid king, but he was an honest one. She had known him to have a heart where children and animals were concerned. He was hated by celebrities in the wrong, but he had saved many animal shelters, and had kids of his own that he dutifully protected from the likes of himself and worse.

Nessie threw on her robe, and walked down the stairs to her desk in her office. She pulled up several documents, and grabbed her phone from its charger. Opening her text app, Nessie looked at the name several minutes with misgivings about what she was about to do. She knew she needed to take him up on his offer while it still stood. Tapping the name, she placed her ear buds in, and sat back.

The line had barely rung through when Max answered his phone.

“Nessie! I knew you’d call. It must be pretty bad though for you to consort with the lowly likes of me.” Max’s jovially obnoxious voice boomed through her earpiece.

“It’s not good, Max, but I think I can count on you due to the nature of the case. I’m sure you’ve heard a good portion through the leaks already.” Nessie frowned.

“Yes. I’ll tell you what I know, and you tell me how the Bentons got mixed up in this, and how you’re mixed up in the mess, specifically.” Max had had a crush on Nessie

since they had attended the same college in Akron, Ohio. As Nessie listened, Max told her everything he knew. He first learned about the music director after Sweeny had been brought up on charges of child sexual abuse and battery. After that, he found out a local prostitute was claiming that the music director, and several local men were involved in an underage prostitution ring that was a decade old, and that the Bentons' name was listed in court documents. At that point Max was a bit sheepish about his sources because their names should never have been leaked. It was after he had learned about their involvement that he had first texted Nessie offering to help. He heard that the man who was being called the ring leader of the whole thing had committed suicide rather than be taken into custody, and that he had probably killed his own son in a business disagreement. Now Max waited to hear Nessie's side of the story.

“How on earth do you and Dan fit into all this? Even I don’t want to hear that you guys are messed up in this. Not with kids being involved.” Max was sincere.

“Well, I can ease your mind on that at least. We got involved when our daughter made friends with one of Sweeny’s victims. She is also Nathan Fuson’s daughter. She has been through more than even you can imagine. She’s not just one of Sweeny’s victims. She’s one of the under-aged girls forced to be involved by her own father against her will. He used her to pay off debts to his friends. I will not elaborate on that, and I doubt I need to. Sweeny and her father had been friends for years.” Nessie waited for Max to respond.

“Whoa. That was not what I was expecting to hear. I’m glad that you guys aren’t involved in a bad way of course, but hearing this involves kids in such a way boils my blood, Ness. So, still. How are you guys in the court papers?”

“We fell in love with the girl. She is smart, talented beyond belief, and aside from having PTSD which is to be expected, she’s amazing despite it all. Dan and I are adopting her officially this week. You know Tom. I don’t have to explain how much we’re going to protect this girl once that is official. I think I can count on you to help out with that, or I wouldn’t have called. Her name doesn’t need to end up plastered on tabloids. She turns eighteen in a few months, and we don’t want this trial being all the colleges see when they consider admitting her. She’s had seventeen years of horror at no fault of her own. This girl deserves a chance at a normal, peaceful life.”

Nessie felt her throat tighten as she spoke. She wanted so badly for Max to somehow feel how adamant she was about Ella’s wellbeing.

“Hmmm. Squeaky clean, kid. You are a gem. I mean that. You people make me happy, and expensive drugs don’t even do that often.” Max laughed. “Here I was thinking all sorts of sorted scenarios, and you’re over there being

Wonder Woman as usual." "You know I didn't get a call back for that part." Nessie smiled, and gave a sigh of relief. She wasn't sure exactly what Max was getting at. Was he disappointed that there was no dirty laundry to air out, or was he on board?

"Ness, I am 100% on your side here. I may be an old ass, but I have zero tolerance for anyone who messes with kids. I'll put out a story about you guys taking in a girl for her protection, and try to make it disappear after that. We gotta say something since your names came up, but we can make it a non-event pretty fast. Her part will fade away pretty quickly, especially if you guys change her name. Everyone will be focused on the adults who did the deeds, and the cheerleaders who came forward. I haven't been a trial lawyer in a few decades, but I'm guessing Tom has told you that the kid probably won't have to take the stand. With a solid deposition, the parents out of the picture, and plenty of witnesses against the accused, she shouldn't need to be called on

unless she needs to testify to get some closure. I think you should be able to keep her out of most of the media, if not all of it. I'll do what I can."

"Thanks, Max. I mean it. I hate to say this, but I owe you one." "As much as I hate to say this; no ya don't, Darlin'. After what you guys are doing for that kid, we are solid." At that, Max ended the call.

# Chapter 23 – Free

Ella stretched her legs out on the blanket in the soft, white sands of Florida's gulf coast. The sun felt luxurious against her skin. The waves lapped at her heels, dampening the large beach towel.

"Time to move closer to the house." Jetty hopped up off her own towel, and dragged it towards the beach house before the next wave washed in. The large home was on a wonderfully private beach near Navarre, away from the droves of Spring Break tourists. It was Ella's first real vacation. She had never been to a beach before, and the feeling of the warm waters on her feet was amazing. She was in no rush to move away.

“I kind of like it.” Ella held a hand up to shield her eyes from the sun.

“You’re going to turn into a fish by the end of the week.” Jetty laughed. “Mom and Dad have been gone a while. They walked down the beach ages ago. They’re probably making out behind a dune somewhere.” Jetty laid back on her towel, and placed her sunhat over her face after dousing herself with sunblock.

“I can’t wait until Ted and Jane get here tomorrow. Then they can put this crud on us.” Ella smiled. The idea of being on this gorgeous beach with Ted was enough to elicit a happy sigh. Jane was driving down with some of her friends for break as well. Jetty and Ella had been taking private lessons since before the trial. Both girls were more than capable of graduating early, but they had decided that they still wanted to graduate with the full senior class.  It had been a week since the nightmare of the trial. Tom and Max had been correct when they assured them that it might be a quick trial. The

community wanted it all out behind them as much as anyone else. It was not something the locals wanted their town known for. Sweeny received a fifteen-year sentence that was whittled down to seven years behind bars, and eight years of probation. He lost his license to teach, and he will be on the national registry of sex offenders for life; required to register wherever he goes. Bill Deglow was sentenced to eighteen years because of his part in the prostitution ring, rape of a minor, and witness testimony stating he had been assaulting Ella since she was seven years old. The trial was a media sensation for a few days until Max splashed the story of a famous celeb's surprise coming out all over his tabloid news show, and magazine. Cami Waterson was currently one of the top billed female actresses in Hollywood. She had planned to announce her engagement to her long-time girlfriend soon anyhow. When she had confided that to Ted on the set of their film while apologizing for their lack of chemistry, he told her all about what was

happening to Ella, and how worried he was about how the press would react. Cami was furious when she heard what had happened to the girl. She'd seemed like a great kid on set. Together, they decided there was one type of story the news went crazier for than any other, and Nessie helped put them in touch with Max. Understandably, Max felt like the luckiest man on earth. A little perfect story-release timing from the reigning tabloid king, and the trial was instantly buried under Cami's coming out, and subsequent wedding plans. As soon as they were no longer needed in town, the Bentons packed up, and headed for an extended vacation in Florida. Nessie's extended family had owned the large rental home on the gulf coast since she was a child. It belonged to her uncle who was more than happy to let the family borrow it while they prepared for the move back to the West coast. It had been an easy decision to move back to Northern California for Nessie and Daniel even though the girls would be returning to

the Midwest once college classes began in the fall. Ella and Jetty had both been accepted into several of the same colleges. They decided to stay together. Northwestern became the clear winner for both, and the lure of the city of Chicago was too great to pass up. For now, however, all they needed to be concerned about was avoiding sunburns, and sand in awkward places.

The sun was beginning to set on the gulf, and the few clouds which hung low over the waters looked like bright pink cotton candy. Ella looked down the gorgeous beach as Nessie and Daniel came leisurely walking towards them. She pushed her sunglasses up on her head, looked from the dozing Jetty to the two people she now adored. The gratitude that she felt was almost too much to contain. She smiled at the pair who waved as they approached. This was what family should be. There didn't have to be money, or beaches, or glamour. All there needed to be was a core group who cared, and wanted her in their lives for all the right reasons with no

strings attached. She waved back to them, laid back on her warm towel, and closed her eyes.